CANDLE LIGHT

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THE MAN WITHOUT A HEART,
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CANDLE LIGHT
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PART ONE

Our phantom voices haunt the air
As we were still at play.
And I can hear them call and say,
"How far is it to Babylon?"
Ah, far enough, my dear,
Far, far enough from here.
Yet you have farther gone!

"Can I get there by candlelight?"
So goes the old refrain.
I do not know—perchance you might—
But only children hear it right.
Ah! never to return again!
The eternal dawn, beyond a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And put all stars and candles out
Ere we be young again.

R. L. Stevenson.

CANDLE LIGHT

Part One

Chapter I

IN the bright sunshine of a July afternoon two children sat side by side on an old weed-covered breakwater dangling their brown legs and feet in the cool, smooth water and talking earnestly.

They were not at all a picturesque pair, for the girl, although only about nine years of age, was undeniably plain, with the hopeless plainness of utter indifference to her appearance, and the boy was sunburnt and freckled beyond belief.

He was several years the elder of the two, with stalwart shoulders and sturdy limbs, and at the moment he was garbed in short knickers which had once been white, and a flannel shirt which was torn at the shoulder and which was minus two buttons.

And he was saying in a lordly voice:

"You haven't caught one crab since you've been here! Not *one!* I've caught dozens."

The girl's greyish-green eyes were turned upon

him with envy, mingled with shy adoration and pride to think that this lordly creature, who had the shells of dozens of crabs to his credit, should condescend to waste his valuable time talking to her.

"Really . . . dozens?" she ventured timidly.

"Of course!" There was a touch of the braggart in his voice, and as if conscious of it he hastened to add: "I'll give you the next one I catch, if you like."

"Oh, thank you, thank you ever so much."

Her plain face flushed with gratitude, and as if to hide the embarrassing fact, she pulled the starched frill of her unbecoming cotton sun-bonnet farther forward with nervous fingers.

The hero beside her hooked a strip of weed out of the sea on the end of his big toe and watched the water drip from it before he asked casually:

"I say, what's your name?"

"Minnie."

He made no comment, but he wrinkled up his sunburnt nose as if in disapproval, and after a moment she ventured:

"What's yours?"

"William, but my people call me Bill."

William! Yes, that was a fitting name for anyone so wonderful, she told herself, and through her mind filtered dreamy memories of hated history lessons.

"William the Conqueror, 1066.
William Rufus, 1087.
. . . !"

Great men, both of them, to her child's mind, but neither of them so great as this William the Third, who sat beside her in the sunshine in his dirty knickerbockers and torn shirt.

She stole a shy glance at him and thought what a magnificent specimen of manhood he was in spite of his sunburnt face, on which the skin had unbecomingly commenced to peel, and she wondered in what year he had been born, so that she might add his date to the long line of dead and gone kings.

She was trying to gain sufficient courage to ask the question when he spoke abruptly:

"I don't care much for the name 'Minnie.'"

"Oh, don't you?"

There was a note of disappointment in her voice, and her heart sank.

"Where did your people get it from?" William the Third demanded brusquely. "Is it a family name?"

Minnie had only the vaguest idea as to what a family name meant, but she answered at once:

"No, I don't think so. It's my mother's name."

"Oh, I see."

The note of disparagement was still in his voice, and after a moment he asked loftily:

"Do you know any Latin?"

She shook her head mutely yet so decidedly that her sun-bonnet fell off and hung down her back, held only by its crumpled strings, unkindly showing her rather high forehead, from which the straggly brown hair was strained away and tied with a black bow.

The sharp eyes of William the Third were turned upon her with blank amazement.

"You don't know any Latin? Don't they teach you any at school?"

Another shake of the head, followed by a hopeful supplementary:

"We learn French."

"Oh! Conversation, of course?"

A subdued nod answered him, and an additional shyly proud:

"I can recite in French."

"Let's hear you."

Minnie jammed the sun-bonnet back on to her head again, and from the depths of its starched frills began a parrot-like sing-song:

"Petit gars bleu, a vou cor sans delai!
Vois le brebis en prairie, la vache dans le blé!
Ou est le garçonnet qui leur doit soins?
Il dort a poings——"

Her pronunciation, never good, was made worse than usual by her extreme nervousness,

and like a hawk swooping beside her, William the Third demanded:

"Do you know the translation?"

She broke off in the middle of a stumbling last line and flushed dully:

"I . . . no, I don't," she admitted helplessly.

"I thought not! And it's only 'Little Boy Blue.' I should have thought you could have guessed."

The scorn of his voice brought the tears to her eyes.

"That's generally the way with private schools." He went on, appropriating a sentiment of his father's: "Everything taught like a parrot."

Minnie winced and bit her lip.

"Don't *you* go to a private school, then?" she faltered.

"Me!" William forgot his grammar in his sense of outraged dignity. "I go to a public school! Berkhampstead." Pause. "It's very expensive," he added loftily.

"Oh!"

Her crushing sense of defeat was complete, and after a moment she withdrew her feet and legs from the sea and scrambled awkwardly up on to the breakwater.

William the Third turned his head.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Home."

The reply was wavering, and struck by something in her voice, William the Third swung himself round and scrambled to his feet beside her.

"Here! Wait for me."

But either she did not hear the command or else she had no intention of obeying, for she was halfway up the shelving beach before he overtook her.

"I told you to wait," he grumbled breathlessly.

From the depths of the sun-bonnet came her reply:

"I didn't want to."

"Not want to!" This was the first time in their two days' acquaintance that she had shown open rebellion, and, amazed beyond words, he grabbed at her hand to drag her round to him.

She struggled ineffectually, and the sun-bonnet fell off once again, revealing the tears wet on her cheeks and her hot, shamed eyes.

William the Third dropped her hand, and his mouth fell open.

"Good Lord! What are you crying for?" he demanded blankly.

The colour burned fiercely in her cheeks, and she stamped her foot at him in sudden rage.

"You're such a . . . *swanker!*" she panted, and then, all her courage gone, and in terror at her own daring, she turned and fled up to the road, her sun-bonnet once more dangling disconsolately by its strings.

But they made it up that night over a bag of chocolates, when the sun was down and a cool breeze was blowing in from the sea to fan the hot face of the earth.

Minnie was just ready for bed, and had risen from her knees on the dusty carpet of the apartment room where she was spending a fortnight with a maiden aunt, the last automatic words of a prayer unfinished on her lips:

"Pray God bless my mother, and father, and Aunt Louise, and all kind friends, and make me a good girl, for Christ's sake. Amen——"

She was reaching up (under strict instructions) to blow out the candle which stood on a chest of drawers when, from outside, something struck the windowpane.

Minnie turned round, a quaint little figure in the flickering candlelight, her pink flannel nightgown too short for her, and showing half of her thin legs, and her straight hair tortured into two tight plaits, as she stared through the blindless window into the twilit world outside.

Nothing to be seen or heard, and she had puckered up her lips once more to extinguish the candle, when a boy's shrill whistle broke the silence, followed by her name softly called: "Minnie."

William the Third!

Minnie nearly dropped the cheap candlestick in her excitement, and then, mindful of the land-

lady's warning to her aunt—"Whatever you breaks, you pays for"—she clutched it tightly to her again, and tiptoed across the room.

There was a pale crescent moon climbing the grey sky, and by its faint light she could just make out the outline of William the Third's sturdy figure and the gleam of his once white knickers.

It was only a little way down to the path on which he stood, and the window was open at the bottom, so, following his whispered instructions, Minnie set the candlestick down on the window-sill, where it spluttered and flickered in the breeze, and leaned out as far as she could to him, the tight plaits dangling on each side of her face, and her child's heart palpitating wildly beneath the pink flannel nightgown.

"Why have you gone to bed so early?"

William the Third's voice came up to her with romantic huskiness through the cool night.

"I was late for tea, and Aunt Louise was cross."

"What a shame."

There was a little silence, then: "Mind your hair in that candle," William the Third commanded.

"Yes, thank you." She tossed the tight plaits back over her shoulders.

Another silence, during which she could hear him fidgeting with his feet on the dusty path,

and then he coughed nervously, clearing his throat with unnecessary violence before he asked:

"Are you still cross with me?"

Her warm heart urged an eager reply: "Oh no, no!" but some new wisdom restrained it and gave instead: "Yes . . . I think I am."

She could feel his amazement and saw him move a step nearer to the house as he protested:

"Oh, I say, don't be cross," and then, as she remained silent: "I've brought you some chocolates."

Now Minnie loved chocolates and seldom got them, so at the magic word she forgot her pride and dignity and wounded feelings, and stretched down both hands through the grey evening.

"Oh! how lovely."

"Look out, then. I'll throw them up."

A small and tightly screwed-up bag hurtled through the air, and she caught it with trembling fingers.

"Oh, thank you! *thank you!*" she breathed with heartfelt gratitude.

"They're not very good ones," he apologised.

He was right, they were not! Cheap in the first place—he had only had threepence to spend—they had suffered severely from two hours in the pocket of his knickers; but to Minnie they were wonderful, and her earnestness was unmistakable when, after he had gruffly urged again:

"Are you still cross with me?"

She answered fervently: "Oh *no!*"

William the Third cleared his throat violently once more.

"To-morrow," he announced firmly, "to-morrow I am going to ask you to give *me* something."

"Oh, I *will!*" she promised.

"Really and truly?"

"Yes."

"All right. I'll remind you in the morning."

"Yes."

"Good-night, then."

"Good-night."

He stepped back a pace.

"Mind the candle," he commanded once more, and then with a returning touch of his old bombast he added: "We've got gas where we're staying."

"So have we, in the sitting-room," Minnie retorted.

She took up the candle and laughed.

"Look what the wind's done to it."

William the Third looked.

"That's what they call a winding-sheet," he said solemnly. "Some people who are superstitious would called that awfully bad luck."

"Would they? How do you know?"

"I've got an old aunt who told me."

"Oh!"

Minnie was not superstitious. When he had gone she blew the candle out and put it back on

the chest of drawers before she climbed happily into bed, her mouth all smeared with chocolate.

"What a perfectly lovely day it's been," she thought as she closed her eyes; then she remembered that she had not quite finished her prayers when William the Third's first stone struck the window, and so she said them all over again, with a last sleepy thought for the boy who had walked away whistling through the summer night.

"God bless my father, and mother, and Aunt Louise, and all kind friends, and make me a good girl, and God bless William the Third, and make him a good man, for Christ's sake, Amen——"

Minnie was asleep.

Chapter II

THE following day William the Third reminded her of her promise.

"You said you'd give me something if I asked."

They were sitting side by side on a wooden seat which ran along the back of the little lifeboat house, and Minnie was feeling at a distinct disadvantage because her feet would not quite touch the ground.

William the Third's touched easily, with several inches over to spare, and he kept his eyes steadily fixed on them as he flung his challenge:

"You said you'd give me something this morning if I asked."

"So I will." The reply came readily. "What is it? I'm afraid I haven't got anything very much, and I've eaten all the chocolates."

"It's not chocolates," said William the Third sternly.

"Oh!"

She turned her head, and found his brown eyes upon her; nice eyes they were, with just now a soft, melting look behind their merry twinkle as they met the innocence of hers.

"Can't you *guess?*" he demanded, with the superiority of five years' seniority.

She shook her head. "No!—at least . . . oh!"

The last word was a soft little cry of distressed understanding, and her sunbrowned cheeks flew warm flags of agitation.

William the Third moved an inch nearer to her along the seat.

"Would you mind . . . *very* much?" he submitted.

She tried to nod her head, but found that she had shaken it vigourously instead, and with sudden awkward masterfulness William the Third jerked his head round to her and his lips brushed her cheeks.

"There! it wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked rather breathlessly, and Minnie whispered: "No," adding: "Thank you," as a grateful afterthought.

"Don't mention it," said William the Third magnanimously, and then for some moments they both sat silent; he, with a sense of elation, feeling himself a very fine fellow indeed, and she conscious only of turmoil and confusion, with behind it just a faint, struggling happiness.

Then William the Third said:

"You may not believe me, but I've never kissed a girl before except my cousin, and she's twenty."

"She isn't a girl, then." Minnie answered,

and a cold snap of jealousy touched her heart, "she's a woman."

"A jolly pretty one too," said William the Third.

Minnie's thoughts took a sudden leap backwards to a certain afternoon which she had forgotten until this moment, to her Aunt Louise's rather high-pitched voice, and to the words she had heard her speak:

"Poor Minnie! She'll always be plain. So different to her mother."

She had not minded at all at the time. What did it matter whether she was plain or pretty while there were chocolates in the world and annual seaside holidays? But now all at once she knew that she *did* mind!—terribly!

In a flash she visualised her own thin face and rather high forehead, her straight, unlovely hair and freckled nose, and as she sat there in the sunshine she felt that she would gladly renounce all the chocolates in the world for evermore if only she could be pretty like this unknown cousin of William the Third's.

And she said mournfully:

"No boy ever kissed me before you did."

He looked gratified.

"I shall kiss you again, lots of times," he answered, adding after a moment: "if you don't mind, of course."

"I don't mind," she told him.

He dug a pebble out of the ground with the toe of his boot.

"How old are you?" he demanded.

"Nine. I shall be ten in January."

"Is that all?"

She thought she read disapproval in his voice, and the red flags of distress flew again in her cheeks.

"How old are you, then?" she asked defensively.

"Fourteen next month."

"Oh!" It was manhood to her. "I suppose you'll soon be leaving school," she ventured timidly, and the braggart tone was unmistakable in his voice again as he answered:

"I shall go to the 'Varsity."

She repeated his words, not understanding. "The—the 'Varsity?"

"Yes, Cambridge. It's called the 'Varsity," he explained kindly.

"Oh." There was a little pause. "What will you do there?" she asked after a moment.

But William the Third's attention had been attracted to the shore and a fisherman's boat that had just been beached, and he sprang to his feet.

"Come on, they're bringing in the lobster pots."

He raced off, leaving her to follow as best she could, and she had to be content to stand on the fringe of the crowd surrounding the little boat and watch from afar while William the Third

pushed his way right to the front and made himself a general nuisance by climbing in and out of the boat, and once—oh, what a man!—he actually picked up a live, kicking lobster with his bare fingers.

Minnie got red in the face and nearly cried out, but no terrible tragedy ensued, save that a brawny fisherman in a blue jersey ordered William the Third in stentorian tones to "Put that there down before 'e nips yer 'and off."

And it must be confessed that Minnie felt rather surprised and vaguely disappointed when her William obeyed. She had been so sure that he would defiantly refuse to be ordered about.

However, it had the effect of bringing him back to her side, and together they wandered along the water's edge to the breakwater, and this time it was Minnie who for a change broke the silence.

"We go home on Monday."

William the Third stood still.

"*Monday!* Why we're going to stay another month."

"I know, but we only came for two weeks." Her voice was humble. "My father says he can't afford for me to stay any longer."

William the Third laughed scornfully.

"Fathers always say that. Mine does, but we stay all the same."

"Your father looks kind," said Minnie wist-

fully, with a warm little memory of a grey-haired man with brown eyes very like William the Third's, who always smiled and spoke gently to her when they met.

"Oh, he's not so bad," his son admitted. "What's your pater like?"

Minnie drew her slim shoulders together with a little reminiscent shiver.

"We're all afraid of him," she admitted reluctantly. "He never goes away with us at all."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I don't think he cares about children very much."

"How many are there of you, then?"

"I've got another sister and a brother."

"Why didn't they come with you?"

"I had measles and the doctor said I must go away for a change, so Aunt Louise brought me."

"I see."

They walked a little way in silence, then William the Third broke out energetically:

"Why don't you write and ask your guv'nor to let you stay till we go home?"

Minnie stood stock-still, her mouth opened, and her eyes were as large as saucers.

"Write to him!" she gasped. "Ask him to let me stay! Oh, I'd never dare!"

William shrugged his shoulders.

"You should never let people think you are afraid of them," he said grandiloquently.

"But it's not 'thinking.' I *am* afraid of him!" she declared.

William's brown eyes softened as they rested on her disturbed face.

"Poor kid!" he said.

Minnie turned her head sharply away to hide the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes. She had had a queer, lonely childhood, and though she was quite unaware of it, the half-patronising, half-genuine friendship which this boy had bestowed upon her was calling insistently to the deep wells of untouched affection in her heart, and slowly drawing them to himself.

The thought of Monday, and the knowledge that when she went away he would remain behind with the sea and the sunshine and the baby crabs hurt her intolerably, and yet with it all there was a new, strange pride in her heart which bade her hide her trouble from him, and so she broke into a little run, crying out gaily: "Race you to the breakwater."

It would have been child's play for him to overtake and pass her in a dozen yards, but some instinct kept him at her heels till a sudden gust of wind snatched the big sun-bonnet from her head and whirled it along the sands in front of them.

She came to a breathless, dismayed standstill. "Oh, my bonnet!"

"All right. I'll get it."

He brought it back, flushed and triumphant.

"Let me put it on for you?"

She stood still at once in quiet obedience, and with boyish, clumsy fingers he tied the strings in an extraordinary tangle of knots beneath her chin, taking a little longer about it than was perhaps strictly necessary, and when it was finished and she was moving away with a subdued "Thank you," he put both his hands on her thin shoulders, and bending down kissed her again.

"Don't forget me, will you?" he asked gruffly, almost as if he were angry with her it seemed, but Minnie saw the soft look in his brown eyes, and all her shyness forgotten, she stood on tiptoe and gave him his kiss again.

He jerked his head back violently as if afraid they were being watched, the hot blood rushing to his sunburnt face in an embarrassed torrent, "Silly kid!" he said, but his voice matched the soft, warm look in his eyes, and it was from that moment that Minnie loved him.

Chapter III

MONDAY morning came, and with it a soft, drizzling rain and cloudy skies.

Aunt Louise knelt in her bedroom with all her own and Minnie's belongings littering the floor around her, grumbling and complaining without ceasing as she stuffed them into a large tin trunk.

She was still a young woman, and not bad looking, but there were fretful lines in her face and a discontented expression in her eyes which deepened with the passing of time.

There had once been a curate in her life, and she had chosen to consider his mild attentions serious, but somehow they had never matured, and she believed that she had been the victim of a mischief-maker whose maliciousness had wilfully ruined her life.

She had a small income of her own which she eked out by prolonged visits to Minnie's father and mother, rendering small services for them grudgingly, and considering herself a martyr all the time.

She was no more fond of Minnie than she was of anybody else, but she was not actively unkind to her, as long as the child kept out of her way and did as she was told.

Aunt Louise knew nothing of William the Third. If she had done so, she would have promptly put a stop to the friendship, not because she saw any harm in it, but because of her rooted objection to allowing anyone happiness.

On the same principle she refused all Minnie's mild requests.

"Certainly *not!*" was her invariable answer, and when the child dared to question, "Oh, but why?"

"Because I say so," was the only explanation vouchsafed.

Minnie was standing at the window now while her aunt packed, looking mournfully at the sea, and wondering if the grey skies were crying because she was going away.

She was very unhappy, more unhappy than she had ever been in her life before, but she gave no sign of it beyond the tight pressure of her lips, and the nervous trembling of the hands that twisted the girdle of her ugly blue serge frock.

Minnie never had pretty clothes, for both her mother's and her aunt's argument was that unless you were pretty yourself it did not matter what you wore.

So her sister Adela had all the pretty clothes, and dark, thick, "serviceable" materials were chosen for Minnie's.

"What are you staring at?" her aunt demanded tartly, turning round to look at the child. "Why

don't you go out, and get a breath of fresh air while you can? To-morrow you'll wish you were back by the sea again."

"It's raining, auntie."

"Raining! And is a little rain going to hurt you, I should like to know? Goodness me, are you a hothouse plant? Put on your mackintosh and take my umbrella."

Minnie obeyed, trying not to appear too eager. She knew by experience that had she asked to go out she would at once have been ordered to stay in, and she was trembling with excitement as she left the house and turned along the sea front.

The wind was too high to keep the umbrella up, so after battling with it till she was well out of sight of the windows and Louise's sharp eyes, she put it down and turned towards the lifeboat house.

William the Third was there, looking rather like a large-sized flask in a mackintosh coat of his father's, and with the rain dripping from the brim of a sodden straw hat.

"Thought you weren't coming," was his ungracious greeting, and Minnie gasped out, "So did I!" and gratefully relinquished the umbrella to his stronger grasp.

"What time does the train go?" he asked.

"Twelve o'clock."

"Before dinner then?"

"Yes, we've got ham sandwiches to eat in the train."

"I hate ham sandwiches," he grumbled.

Minnie might truthfully have answered, "So do I," but she did not. She seemed to understand that William's anger was not really against the ham sandwiches at all, but against the unkind Fate that was taking her away. It was raining too hard to sit down, so they walked along, the wind buffeting them from all sides.

"Have you got my address all right?"

William had to shout to make himself heard.

"Yes. Have you got mine?"

"Yes, and I shall write to-morrow, perhaps to-day if I feel like it," he informed her, and her heart leapt.

Letters would be the one bright spot of the dreary future.

"And when we leave this rotten hole I shall ride down on my bicycle to see you," he went on, an odd note of defiance in his voice, as if he knew quite well that he would do nothing of the sort, and was trying *not* to know it!

"Yes."

He glanced down at her suspiciously.

"Is that all you can say?" he demanded.

A nod this time, and his face darkened.

"I believe you're glad to go," he accused her.

"Glad!" Swift words of denial came stumbling to her lips; eager words to tell him how unhappy

she was, more unhappy than she had ever been in her life before, but they were never spoken, for at that moment a grey-haired man in a big overcoat, with the collar turned up about his chin, seemed to swoop down upon them from nowhere, to give one eagle glance at them, and then to stop.

"Hullo, Bill! What are you two children doing out in this rain?"

It was William the Third's father.

Minnie shrank back into her shell like a snail that has been unkindly touched by a rough hand, and William seemed to dwindle from his heroic and romantic proportions till he was only a red-faced embarrassed schoolboy in a mackintosh many sizes too large for him.

Even the tone of his voice seemed to have changed as he managed to get out the words:

"I'm just coming home. I'll come with you."

Minnie grabbed her umbrella from him. "I'm going too," she breathed. And she was gone, running as fast as her trembling limbs and the boisterous wind would allow her, splashing recklessly through puddles and over the road.

And that was their good-bye.

Afterwards William the Third's father said to his wife: "Bill was with that plain little girl again this morning. Odd what the boy sees in her."

"I think she has rather a sweet smile,"

William's mother said kindly. "I think I shall ask her to tea."

She mentioned it to William the Third that night, but he never raised his head from the book in which he was apparently engrossed as he growled out two words, "She's gone!"

"Gone! Oh, what a pity!" said his mother. "I should like to have asked her to tea."

"Rot!" said William the Third ungraciously, and he banged his book down on a table and banged upstairs to his room, and it was there by the light of an indifferent gas-jet and with the aid of a scratchy pen and a bottle that was almost dry of ink that he wrote his first love letter.

"DEAR MINNIE,

"As I suppose you are home by now I will keep my promise and write you a letter. I hope you got home all right. I am sorry you ran away in the rain like you did. . . ."

At the time he had been thankful, but he had forgotten that now.

". . . It is still raining here, but I hope it will clear up to-morrow so that I can go fishing."

And at that point he stopped, gnawed the end of his pen, and frowned. What a stupid letter! Not at all what he intended to write. However, perhaps she would understand.

He dipped the nib in the ink-bottle again, found it quite dry by this time, and getting up, added

some water from the washstand jug. With matters thus slightly improved, he continued:

". . . If you had stayed my mother would have asked you to tea. Perhaps next summer we shall both go to the same place again. Do you hope so? I think I do. I shall look out for an answer to this letter.

"With love from

"WILLIAM THE THIRD."

After mature consideration he added two crosses which might have been intended either for kisses or mistaken for scratchings out.

Minnie took them for kisses, and she carried the not very satisfactory epistle about with her till its edges grew ragged and its writing blurred.

Three days afterwards she answered it, and this is what she wrote:

"DEAR WILLIAM,

"I got your letter, and I got home safely. I got up early and took it out of the letter-box before anyone came down. Thank you very much. I hope it cleared up so you could go fishing. I wish I could go fishing with you. Yes, I hope we go to the same seaside place next year, but I hope first you will ride down on your bicycle. I go back to school on September 3rd. When do you go? It is very nice here to-day, but I wish I was with you.

"Love from

"MINNIE."

And then in order to get a stamp with which to post that letter, Minnie stole for the first and last time in her life. Having asked her mother and Aunt Louise, and even the housemaid, in vain for a penny with which to buy one she was finally reduced to despair.

"A penny! What do you want a penny for!" they each demanded in turn, her mother gratuitously asking the question, "Do you think I am made of money?" She had no patience with Minnie. She considered it a personal affront that the child was so plain and uninteresting.

"What do you want a penny for, pray?" Aunt Louise demanded. "You've only just come back from a lovely holiday. You're an ungrateful little girl."

"What I was your age, Miss Minnie, I never had any money at all," the housemaid said severely, adopting the tone of rebuke and disapproval which every member of the household reserved for Minnie.

"A penny isn't much," the child pleaded.

"It's too much for you, anyway," was the only reply she got. "And run away and don't bother."

Minnie went out of the room, her heart beating high with indignation, and down to her father's study. It was a room of which she usually stood in holy terror, but now, knowing he was out, she entered with a firm step.

She crossed the soft carpet to the writing-table and lifted the silver lid of his stamp-box. So many stamps! Halfpenny and penny ones! Surely it would not be such a terrible thing to take just one?

But she shut her eyes as she took it. She kept her eyes shut as she licked it with a hot, guilty

tongue, and stuck it on to the envelope which was addressed in a smudged, scrawly hand to "Master William Winter." Then she shut the lid of the silver box again and walked firmly out of the room.

But that night she faltered a little over her prayers, and when it came to the last words, "God bless me and make me a good girl," for an instant she hid her face in the counterpane and waited breathlessly for some sign of the Almighty anger.

But nothing happened, the Almighty apparently not being at all shocked.

Chapter IV

BUT after the first few weeks the correspondence between William the Third and Minnie began to flag and lose interest. William went back to school and found other distractions, and Minnie's face, which had at first haunted him with a faithful persistence that was almost a pain, began to fade from his memory. When her letters came—childish letters and badly written—he read them almost guiltily and hurriedly destroyed them. He had got to that age when he had a nervous horror of chaff, and yet not quite to that age when it was considered the manly thing to receive letters from girls.

So Minnie's last letter was left unanswered altogether, and the weeks went by, and the months, and another summer came and went, and William the Third spent his vacation with a school friend who lived in the country, and they had a very fine time indeed. Now this school friend had a sister who was as pretty as a picture, with long, fair, real curly hair, and eyes as blue as a summer sky, and although William always felt tremendously romantic whenever he was with her, and tremendously anxious for her to like him, the odd thing about it all was that for

some not to be explained reason her presence brought the memory of Minnie back most forcibly to his mind, with the result that one day he went up to his bedroom, armed with paper and pens, and sat down and wrote her the following not very inspired epistle:

"DEAR MINNIE,

"I dare say you have forgotten all about me by this time, but I have not forgotten you. I am staying here for my holidays with a chap from our school, and we are having a good time. Where are you spending your holidays, and do you remember last year? I am going home on Tuesday, so write to me there.

"Hoping you are well,

"Love from

"WILLIAM THE THIRD."

Minnie found that letter lying on the hall table one afternoon when she came in from school. Fortunately neither her mother nor her Aunt Louise were in when it arrived, or she would never have received it, but as it was she fled upstairs to her room with it, her heart beating fast, and her hands shaking with nervous excitement as she opened it.

For months William had not written to her at all; furthermore he had left her last letter unanswered. Well, she would treat him in the same way, she decided, and so, although she carried the unromantic epistle about with her by day and slept with it under her pillow by night, she let a whole month go by before she wrote in reply, and

then it was a very short letter and entirely non-committal:

"DEAR WILLIAM,

"Thank you for your letter. I am glad you had a good holiday. I did not have one at all this year. You never rode down on your bicycle, did you? I hope you are well."

And after much consideration she signed herself,

"Yours sincerely" ("sincerely spelt wrong),
"MINNIE ATHERTON."

William read the letter with a faint sense of disappointment until he got to the misspelt word —then he looked supercilious and thrust it hurriedly away in his pocket.

She was only a kid after all, he told himself, with a sense of great superiority. How old would she be? About ten, he decided—whist he—well, now he was head monitor of the school, and had passed his matric.

So once again Minnie's letter remained unanswered until the following Easter holidays, when one Saturday afternoon the same school friend, who was again spending them in William's company, said:

"How'd you like to bike into the country with me to see some people I know?"

William sniffed. "How far?" he asked lazily.

"Oh, about fifteen miles. It's a good road."

"Where is it?"

"Walton."

"Walton?" William sat up and took notice, a little surprised flush in his brown face.

"Walton! I used to know a—some people living there," he explained rather vaguely.

"Oh! Well, will you come?"

"If you like."

So they went. It was a hot, dusty day for the time of year, and both their faces were unromantically streaked with dirt long before they rode into Walton town, and it was only then—for he felt strangely embarrassed—that William enquired tentatively:

"What's the name of the people you're going to see?"

Tankerton blushed ingenuously.

"Oh—er—Atherton," he answered evasively. "My sister goes to boarding school with one of the Atherton girls."

William the Third nearly fell off his bicycle in his amazement.

"Not—not—Minnie Atherton?" he gasped.

"No, that's her sister—she's only a kid," Tankerton explained. "The one *I* know is Isabel—jolly pretty! She—— I say, how do *you* know them?" he demanded interestedly.

William free-wheeled with elaborate indifference. "Oh, I met the young sister away somewhere," he said airily. "Not a bad little thing," he added magnanimously, but his heart warmed

at the memory of a kiss given and received on the windy seashore two years ago.

They rode into the town almost in silence and turned sharply to the left until they came to an ugly, square-looking building standing back from the road in an uninteresting garden with carriage gates painted yellow.

"Here we are," said Tankerton.

He jumped off his machine and began to brush the dust from his tweed knickers.

William the Third followed suit. "Have you been here before?" he asked rather constrainedly.

"Good Lord, yes! Several times. Isabel's been to stay at our place too."

"Oh!"

William felt rather out of it as they wheeled their machines side by side up the drive.

"What's the old man like?" he asked after a moment, with a sudden recollection of Minnie's fear of her father.

Tankerton shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, he's a bit of a bear!—but *I* get on with him all right," he added grandiloquently.

They had reached the house now.

"I always go round to the side door," Tankerton said. "There's a yard where we can leave the bikes—— Hullo!" He broke off, as a girl in a not overclean cotton frock came running round the side of the house, her lank, straight hair flying behind her, and a big grey sheepdog

puppy leaping up at her joyously. She stopped dead when she saw the two boys, her thin fingers tugging at the dog's collar to hold him back—then her eyes fell upon William, and she went quite white, as if something had frightened her, and at first she seemed not to hear Tankerton's condescending greeting:

"Hullo, kid! Anyone at home? We've just biked down from London."

It seemed as if she found her voice with a great effort to say:

"Isabel's in the garden."

"I'll go and find her."

Tankerton went off eagerly, and Minnie looked helplessly at William the Third.

"I suppose you've forgotten me," he submitted.

His face was fiery red.

Minnie shook her head dumbly. She could not have spoken had her life depended on it, and William said again:

"I *have* come, after all, you see."

"Yes."

And then the silence fell once more, till William again broke it bluntly.

"What a dirty frock you've got on!"

He did not mean to be rude or unkind—he spoke through sheer nervousness, but Minnie flushed to the roots of her hair, and the ready tears welled to her eyes.

"If I'd known you were coming, I'd have worn my best frock," she said pathetically.

William could have bitten his tongue out. He longed to apologise, but pride would not allow him to do so, and after an embarrassed silence he put out a hot hand and patted the sheep dog's shaggy head. "What's he called?" he asked.

She told him timidly.

"Four—because he was the fourth puppy."

"Oh!" The superior tone was uppermost in his voice once again. "You should change it to 'Quartus'—it sounds better," he said, and then, as she made no comment, he added in condescending explanation, "that's Latin."

"Yes," said Minnie humbly.

They looked at each other in mutual embarrassment for a moment, then Minnie remembered her duty as hostess and led the way round the house to the yard, where Tankerton had already stowed his bicycle and was talking to Isabel.

She and Minnie were as unlike as it is possible for sisters to be, and though only fifteen Isabel was tall and slender with the loveliest wavy hair and blue eyes, and the carriage of a queen.

"I say, is that your sister?" William the Third asked in amazement, and he did not see how Minnie winced as she answered:

"Yes, we're not a bit alike, are we?"

"Not a bit," he agreed vehemently.

Isabel was as calm and self-controlled as

Minnie was shy and nervous. She greeted both the boys composedly, and informed them that they had better go into the house and wash.

Minnie found her courage then in one desperate rush, and whispered huskily to William:

"Don't, oh, don't tell them you knew me before."

He stared at her in blank amazement.

"Don't they know?" he enquired.

Minnie shook her head.

He fell back a step.

"Don't they know you used to write to me?" he asked.

"No—" and then with a burst of confidence, "I used to buy the stamps with my pocket money. I get twopence a week."

"Oh!"

The two boys disappeared into the house, and Minnie drew near to her sister.

"Will mother be wild because they've come?" she whispered.

Isabel's cool blue eyes looked her up and down. "Wild! Why on earth should she be?" she enquired loftily. "I suppose we must know *some* boys."

"Yes, of course," said Minnie humbly.

She fled up to her room and changed her soiled frock, made her face shine with a too generous application of soap, and brushed her hair back with painful neatness; then in an agony of shy-

ness she descended the stairs to find her mother and Aunt Louise in affable conversation with the two boys, and Isabel looking very pretty and entirely at her ease perched on the arm of her mother's chair.

A slight frown came over Mrs. Atherton's face as she looked at her younger daughter.

"Oh, and this is Minnie," she said reluctantly. "And I have one son, you know, but he is at Cambridge."

She brought that fact out with great aplomb, and Minnie looked quickly at William to see what effect this piece of intelligence had on him, but he took it quite quietly, only asking interestedly:

"Which college?"

And when Mrs. Atherton told him "Magdalene," he said coolly, "I'm going to Caius."

And then the gong sounded for lunch and they all went into the dining-room.

Nobody talked to Minnie. She sat between Aunt Louise and William the Third, but he seemed to find her mother more interesting than anyone else, and Minnie felt hurt and insignificant.

Her child's heart swelled with wounded indignation at the way everyone ignored her—it seemed impossible that William had ever been her friend, ever kissed her behind the shelter of the lifeboat house.

In the afternoon it rained.

"You mustn't think of going back yet," Mrs. Atherton said cordially. She preferred boys to girls, and both these boys were very polite and attentive to her; besides which, she was a woman with a strong eye to the future, and she had already made tentative enquiries about the position of Tankerton's people.

"You never know, Louise," so she said afterwards to her sister, "what may come of these boy and girl friendships. Isabel is only fifteen, I know, but she is so charmingly pretty, and of course she will get married."

So she exerted herself to amuse the boys during the wet afternoon, and did her best to show off her pretty daughter to the best advantage.

"Play something, darling," she urged, and Isabel played Mendelssohn's Spring Song without a wrong note, and without any expression, and received due applause.

It was then that for the first time William directly addressed Minnie, who was sitting stiffly on the most uncomfortable chair in the room, twisting her thin legs ungracefully.

"Don't you play, or anything?" he demanded. Minnie grew scarlet, and her eyes cast a terrified appeal at her mother.

"I am afraid Minnie is not a pianist," Mrs. Atherton said with a too-sweet smile. "She is a naughty girl, and will not practise, but she is

learning to recite quite nicely. Minnie, say that last poem you learnt with Miss Jarrold."

"Oh, mother, *must* I?" There was an agony of entreaty in Minnie's voice, and her lips quivered. She still remembered, though William had forgotten, her luckless attempt to recite to him in French, and his superior criticism.

But Mrs. Atherton had no compassion.

"I am not in the habit of being disobeyed," she said coldly.

Minnie struggled to her feet; the room was rocking giddily about her and the blood was hammering in her ears. She stood in ungainly fashion, with one shoulder up and the other down, her thin hands wrenching nervously at each other.

"Give out the title nicely," her mother commanded.

Minnie moistened her lips with a trembling tongue; she kept her scared eyes fixed on a high corner of the painted ceiling.

"To Minnie—
"By Robert Louis Stevenson——"

Her voice shook badly.

"Speak up and don't fidget," said Mrs. Atherton.

Minnie brought her eyes down for one frantic second to the level of William's face.

He was not laughing; he was looking at her quite kindly and gravely. It was only he in all

the room who counted; her mother and Aunt Louise, Isabel, and the boy Tankerton—she cared nothing for them or what they thought of her poor achievement as she began in a thin, sing-song voice that grew fainter and less distinct as she struggled on.

"The red room with the giant bed,
Where none but elders lay their head:
The little room where you and I
Did for awhile together lie—
And, simple suitor, I your hand
In decent marriage did demand.
The great day nursery, best of all . . ."

Minnie spoke the words in mechanical sing-song fashion, divesting them of all rhythm and beauty, and yet something like a lump rose in William's throat, and he looked away from her strained, nervous face, and kept his eyes towards the garden, as she struggled on to the end:

"Our phantom voices haunt the air,
As we were still at play,
And I can hear them call and say:
'How far is it to Babylon?'
Ah, far enough, my dear,
Far, far enough from here—
Yet you have farther gone!

"'Can I get there by candlelight?'
So goes the old refrain.
I do not know—perchance you might—
But only children hear it right,
Ah, never to return again!

The eternal dawn beyond a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And put all stars and candles out,
Ere we be young again . . ."

Her voice trailed down and stopped jerkily. She turned tragic eyes to her mother, an angry spot of red burning on either cheek.

"I can't say any more. I've forgotten the rest——"

Mrs. Atherton frowned.

"She is always the same." She appealed to her audience. "She has no memory. It is absolutely waste of money to try and teach her anything. You said that very badly, Minnie, like a parrot! and it is such a charming poem—one of my favourites."

She looked at William with a plaintive smile.

"I wrote a note to Miss Jarrold myself," she said with a sigh. "Miss Jarrold is the elocution mistress at the school, you know, and asked her to allow Minnie to learn that particular piece, hoping she would be interested and try to say it nicely, because her name is Minnie too." (Another sigh.) "I might as well have saved myself the trouble."

Minnie went back to her uncomfortable chair. "I hate reciting," she said sulkily, "I don't want to learn."

"You are a rude little girl," said her mother.

William leapt gallantly into the widening breach.

"The rain's stopped," he said. He got up and went to the window; somehow the distress and bitter mortification in Minnie's face hurt him. "Don't you think we ought to be going?"

"Oh, but you must have some tea first," Mrs. Atherton insisted. "It's just teatime. I will go and hurry them up."

She left the room, and William came over to where Minnie sat.

He wanted to say something kind to her, he wanted to see her smile, but he felt tongue-tied and stupid. Aunt Louise was talking to Isabel and young Tankerton, and under cover of the conversation Minnie raised her miserable eyes to William's face.

"I suppose you'll never come again," she said hardily.

William's brown eyes softened as they rested on her face.

"Of course I shall," he said.

* * * * *

The grey spring evening was closing in rapidly when they took their departure. There was a great fuss to get the lamps lit on the bicycles, and when that was done William discovered that his back tyre wanted blowing up. Tankerton had

walked round to the front of the house with Isabel and her mother, and Minnie stood beside William, obediently holding the handle-bars while he laboured at the pump.

She watched his face in the yellow light which streamed from the open house door, and wondered in her puzzled child's way why they seemed to have grown such an immeasurable distance from each other since those days by the sea.

He looked just the same to her—a little taller, a little broader, but otherwise unchanged—and she thought rather sadly of the morning when he first kissed her. No doubt he had kissed many girls since then, no doubt he had often kissed his pretty cousin.

William rose to his feet, puffing a little, and hot.

"Phew! That's done!"

He looked furtively round. It was quite dark, save for a yellow gleam of light from the open side-door leading into the house.

Tankerton's voice shouted through the darkness.

"Come on, Winter, hurry up!"

William made a grab at Minnie's arm and dragged her to him.

"Good-bye," he said gruffly, and, bending, brushed her cheek with his lips.

Then he mounted his bicycle and rode off as if his life depended on it.

Chapter V

WILLIAM kept his promise to Minnie of renewed visits in erratic fashion, half-heartedly and intermittently during the following years.

There were months during which she never saw him at all or even heard from him, and then again months during which his appearances were almost frequent.

Sometimes he only stayed for a few hours, sometimes he extended his visit for a week-end, but as far as Minnie was concerned he was always welcome.

Minnie was growing up fast. She was not quite as lanky or as plain as she had given promise to be, but she was still plain and rather shy, though, as even her mother reluctantly admitted: "You know, there *is* something about Minnie after all! I can't describe what I mean, but there is something which will be attractive some day, even if it isn't now! She is one of those girls who will develop late."

William, on the other hand, had developed surprisingly early, and at four-and-twenty he was, or pretended to be, a blasé man about town, with no more worlds left to conquer.

He had grown from a burly, rather clumsy youth into an athletic, broad-shouldered man, with a deep voice that made Minnie's heart turn over whenever she heard it, and with an amount of knowledge that left her breathless.

In after years it seemed to her as if her life had been like a grey uninteresting road broken only at long intervals by the little panoramic visits of William Winter; and although nothing very surprising or wonderful ever happened during those visits, they nevertheless stood out against their drab background rainbow hued!

For instance, there was the never-to-be-forgotten occasion when he taught her to ride a bicycle—taught her on his own machine with its inconvenient bar, and laughed at her unkindly when she found it impossible to dismount by means other than falling.

Then there was a certain Saturday afternoon in spring when he had taken her primrosing.

He had made her tramp more dusty miles than she had ever walked in her life before in order to reach some woods where, as he expressed it, "the primroses make a carpet."

He was right as it happened. The primroses were wonderful, but, never very strong, Minnie was so tired it seemed too much effort to stoop and pick them, until William chided her with laziness and goaded her to fresh efforts in order to disguise her weariness.

"And now we'll go home," he said, when the baskets they had brought were filled to overflowing and the sun was setting, leaving the wood full of shadows.

"Very well," Minnie agreed obediently. But she was so tired she could hardly drag one foot before the other, till at last, despite her gallant efforts to conceal the fact, William realised what was wrong and stopped.

"Are you *tired?*" he asked, surprised.

Minnie nodded.

"Awfully! I don't know how I shall ever get home."

William whistled.

"Let's sit down and think what can be done," he said, and Minnie collapsed thankfully on to a grassy bank, overturning the basket of primroses at her feet.

William looked down at her in comical dismay; he was so strong himself that he could not understand anyone crocking up after a mere five-mile walk, and though he was sorry for Minnie's fatigue, he was slightly contemptuous also.

"You stay here, and I'll reconnoitre," he said, and left her. He was gone for some time, and she was beginning to feel faintly alarmed when she heard his voice, and a moment later he came into sight on the dusty road, pushing a green-painted farm barrow before him.

"It's all I could find," he apologised, wheeling

it up to her triumphantly. "It's a bit dirty, but I don't suppose you'll mind. Get in, and I'll push you home."

Minnie stood up, flushing in dismay.

"Get in! In *that?*" she gasped.

"Of course! What's the matter with it?"

"But—but I'm so heavy!"

"Nonsense." William laughed, and began to gather up the scattered primroses. "Get in. I'm as strong as an ox. I shall never feel it."

And apparently he was right, for they arrived back on the outskirts of Walton in record time, and there Minnie called a halt.

"I'll walk the rest of the way, thank you very much. We might meet someone who knows me," she said earnestly. William laughed.

"Who cares? I began the job, and I'm going to finish it properly," and in order to prevent her from getting out, he broke into a run which he maintained all the way through the respectable, quiet streets of the town, finally coming to a triumphant halt at the yellow gates of the house.

"There! now you may get out," he said rather breathlessly.

Minnie obeyed, showing rather a lot of thin, cotton-stockinged leg in the process.

"You must be as strong as Goliath," she said in humble admiration.

William felt the muscles on his forearm. "It's training that does it," he said modestly.

But there were other memories, less pleasant, that milestoned the years as well, and most of them happened after Minnie got to know Rosa Flint.

Rosa's brother, it appeared, was by a strange coincidence at Caius with William, and many were the tales of his escapades there which Rosa confided to Minnie.

William, it appeared, was no saint! William, it appeared, had often been the worse for drink! and once had narrowly escaped being sent down.

William also, so it would seem, had had various love affairs.

Minnie moistened her lips and tried to look indifferent.

"You mean—is he engaged?" she asked with an effort.

Engaged! Oh, dear, no, Rosa did not mean that—she laughed reminiscently—though there had certainly been *one* very serious affair, she knew, with a cousin of William's, a woman much older than he, but, oh, so very attractive!

Rosa's brother declared he had never met a more attractive woman, and William had been crazy about her!

"I think I've heard about that cousin," Minnie said rather painfully, and in a flash she recalled the first time William had ever kissed her, and the remark he had made about his cousin being

the only other woman whom he had ever so honoured.

Rosa went on heedlessly.

"It was an open secret, Bill says, that Mr. Winter even bought a special licence and carried it about with him for weeks, hoping to be able to persuade her to marry him—but she refused."

"Refused! Why?" Minnie asked. She could not understand anyone in their senses refusing to marry William.

Rosa shrugged her slim shoulders.

"I suppose he hadn't got enough money to satisfy her. He hasn't got any now, as far as that goes."

"I don't see what money matters," Minnie said obstinately. "And, anyway, William will make plenty. He's the cleverest man I've ever met."

"Oh—clever!" Rosa said deprecatingly. "It's not always the clever people who make the money."

"William will," Minnie averred confidently.

Rosa looked at her with good-natured amusement.

"How long have you known this wonderful man, then?" she asked interestedly. "I've never met him myself, you know. I've only heard about him from Bill."

Minnie looked out of the window, the slow little smile which William had grown to look for creeping round her lips.

"I've known him all my life," she said.

And it was about a month later that, calling in casually upon Rosa one evening, she found William there.

For a moment she paused dumfounded in the drawing-room doorway, too surprised to speak or go forward; then all the blood seemed to race down to her heart and pound there till she could hardly breathe.

William in Walton, and she had not known? William here with Rosa! With an effort she forced herself to move towards him and take his outstretched hand.

"Why, what a pleasant surprise," he said.

"Yes. It is a surprise," Minnie agreed. Her nerveless fingers fell from his clasp and she looked round the room, but there was nobody else there.

William was in evening dress, and on a side-table a large bunch of pink roses peeped out of their tissue wrappings.

Minnie walked over to the fire and sat down.

"Have you been here long?" she asked politely.

She wondered if her voice sounded as strange to him as it did to her.

"No." He avoided her eyes as he answered. "I only came an hour ago." There was a pause, and he added, "I am taking Ro—Miss Flint to a dance."

"Oh!"

Minnie sat very still. There seemed nothing else to be said, and a moment later the door opened and Rosa walked in. She was beautifully dressed in peacock blue, with a gold ornament in her hair, and after one glance at her Minnie stood up, painfully conscious of her own uninteresting clothes and clumsy boots.

Rosa greeted her effusively.

"You dear thing! How sweet of you to call! I'm *so* sorry I'm going out. How do you like my frock?"

"It's lovely."

Rosa smiled, well pleased.

"Yes, I think it's rather a success," she admitted. She looked coyly at William. "What do *you* say?" she enquired.

"Charming," William said without much enthusiasm.

Rosa's eyes fell on the flowers, and she gave a little cry of delight.

"For me! Oh, you dear!"

"Yes, for you," said William stolidly.

Minnie took a step forward.

"I must go. I only looked in for a moment."

Rosa kissed her.

"So sweet of you! Do come again soon."

"Thank you."

Minnie ignored William as she walked out of the room. The front door was open, and a hired carriage stood at the kerb.

Minnie's cheeks burned as she walked away—and again the old longing arose in her heart.

"If only I were pretty! If only I were pretty . . ."

A week later William wrote:

"May I come down to see you? or will you come up to town and do a theatre? We might lunch somewhere first and go to a matinée."

Minnie's lips curled into a stiff little smile as she read the few lines in William's beautiful handwriting; she took a week to answer the invitation, and then refused it.

"Mother is not well, and Isabel is away, so I must stay at home." It was an excuse, and William knew it; and he scowled as he read the letter before tearing it into fragments.

"I shan't ask her again," he told himself angrily.

After that he did not write to her, or go to see her for six months, though Minnie heard of him through Rosa Flint from time to time.

"Mr. Winter is doing so and so"; Mr. Winter is taking me to a theatre," and once—and this was Minnie's crowning hurt and grief—Rosa went to Cambridge for May week.

She took a box of wonderful new clothes—her father was a rich tradesman in Walton—and she sent Minnie various post cards with exaggerated descriptions of what she was doing, and of how much she was enjoying herself. Minnie could

not sleep at night for jealousy. She had never been to Cambridge, but she had heard from William of its ancient courts and colleges and winding river, and she hated Rosa for being there in his company. As a matter of fact, after twenty-four hours Rosa had deserted William in favour of the young son of a rich South African Jew, whom she managed with such tact and consummate skill that when she came back to Walton she was safely engaged to him, and as before the spring was over she had married him and gone out to Cape Town, that was the end of her so-called friendship for Minnie.

But it was not the end of the hurt in Minnie's heart, and when some months had gone by with no sign of William, or any word from him, she took his photographs—and there were many of them, for he was a young man who liked to be photographed—off the mantelpiece in her bedroom and put them away with his letters in a locked drawer.

Life had not been very kind to Minnie during those last months, for she was only twenty when her mother was smitten with an incurable disease, and her father's business suddenly failed.

It was then that everybody's burdens seemed to fall upon her young shoulders, and she, who had always been the snubbed and unwanted one in the family, suddenly found that she had become indispensable. Isabel had married a man whose

reputed wealth she was beginning to discover was more reputed than real, and their only brother Ronald had gone abroad to escape a fine crop of wild oats and accumulated debts. To all Minnie's frantic appeals to him for help he turned a deaf ear. He had all his work cut out to keep himself, so he wrote; why the deuce hadn't the 'guv'nor saved some money while he had it?

Minnie did her best. She reasoned with impatient creditors, and begged them to be patient. She was quite sure that her father's money would come back again. Although she had always feared him, and still did, her faith in him was abundant; she simply could not believe that his career was finished.

Aunt Louise, soured and flat-chested with the passing of years, laughed her optimism to scorn.

"Your father is ruined! He's down and out," she declared. "Nothing will ever put him on his feet again." She had no sympathy or kindly feeling towards anyone—she considered failure a disgrace. She did not believe in such things as misfortune or bad luck.

"A nice thing for us all to be dragged down and pauperised like this," she wailed, "and your mother so ill! If she dies, her death will lie at your father's door."

All this took place in Mrs. Atherton's bedroom, with the poor woman lying there listening, until

with a feeling that she could bear no more Minnie went out of the room and downstairs.

When she reached the hall, she sat down on the bottom stair with a feeling of utter hopelessness. She was not used to grappling with life, and she had no idea how to help herself or her father.

Quartus, the sheepdog, old now and blind in one eye, crept to her and lay down at her feet. The name which William the Third had bestowed upon him in a moment of arrogance had stuck to him, and he had been "Quartus" to the entire household ever since, though probably only Minnie knew how the name had originated. She stooped and laid a hand on his rough head with a sense of security and comfort. Often she felt that he was the only friend she had—the only creature in the world who really loved her disinterestedly.

"What can I do? What can I do?" she was asking herself over and over again desolately. "If only I could make some money to help them all! If only I were clever."

There was a sharp ring at the door-bell, and she rose to her feet with a sigh. The one maid was out, and Aunt Louise never thought of moving a step if Minnie was there to move for her.

It was getting dark as she drew back the latch, and at first she did not recognise the man who stood on the doorstep until he spoke, then her heart turned over and over in traitorous fashion.

"Well—won't you ask me to come in?" said William Winter.

"Of course. I didn't recognise you. Do please come in."

She shut the door and silently led the way into the sitting-room. The gas was not lit, and the fire had burnt low, and Minnie stooped to poke it into a blaze, to give herself time in which to recover her composure.

"Mother's ill," she said, not very steadily. "Very ill, I'm afraid, and"—she turned and looked at William in the dim light—"father's failed in business. I suppose you haven't heard, so I may as well tell you the worst at once."

She tried to laugh, not very successfully. "They've made him a bankrupt, we only knew to-day, and I——" She stopped suddenly and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, I'm so tired of it all, so tired," she said brokenly.

There was a little silence, then William put out his hand and drew one of hers down from her face, keeping it in his strong clasp.

"Why didn't you write to me? Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"How could I? Why should I? What's the use of worrying other people with our troubles?"

It was in her heart to add, "Besides, I wrote to you last," but she kept silent.

"I am your oldest friend," William reminded her.

"I know." She had not forgotten that, though it seemed during the past six months as if he had.

She wiped her tears shamefacedly away and tried to smile.

"You won't come again if I'm so depressing."

"You've said that to me before, several times, and I always do come again, don't I?" he asked.

"Yes—but sometimes it's a long while between," she answered. She could not for the life of her have kept back just that one reproach.

He made no reply, and Minnie drew her hand away.

"Sit down and tell me all the news," she said. "What are you doing in Walton to-night?"

He laughed.

"How unkind! I came to see you, of course."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth, whether you believe it or not."

He dragged up a chair and sat down straddle-wise, looking up at her with whimsical eyes.

"I was in my rooms in Maddox Street two hours ago, turning out some old letters and photographs," he told her, "and I found—this!"

He took a small old-fashioned *carte-de-visite* photograph from his pocket and showed it to her.

"Do you remember sending me that?"

Minnie glanced at the picture, and the warm blood rushed to her face.

"Oh! that dreadful thing!" she said, dismayed. She would have taken it from him, but he laughed and held it beyond her reach.

"No—you gave it to me and I shall keep it."

"I know I'm not a beauty now," Minnie said, with a mock sigh, "but was I ever as plain as that?"

"It is an excellent portrait of what you were eight years ago," William said. "So excellent that the mere sight of it two hours ago made me want to see you. So I got in the first train and here I am!" He waited. "Well, you have not said that you are glad to see me."

"I am always glad to see you," Minnie told him gently. "You know that."

Yes, he knew that! But he turned his head away with an odd, jerky movement as he answered, "Thank you."

It was some moments before either of them spoke again, then William said:

"I'm sorry about your guv'nor; it's hard luck. What can be done?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing, I'm afraid." Then suddenly she struck her hands together. "Oh, if I could only make some money!"

"That's what we all want to do," William said sententiously.

She sighed, and pushed the straight heavy hair back from her forehead.

"Oh, you'll make it easily enough," she said confidently. "You're so clever."

"It's kind of you to say so, my dear."

"It's true."

William rose and began pacing restlessly about the room, his hands trust into his pockets, his head a little down-bent.

It was the truth that sheer, reawakened desire to see Minnie had driven him here, and yet now he was with her he felt restless and unhappy.

William was very ambitious. He wanted to make a great name for himself, he wanted to be famous, and yet during the last half-hour he had made the surprising discovery that there was something he wanted even more—Minnie! He had made the surprising discovery that he had always loved her, and still loved her.

And yet she had none of the attributes which he admired most in a woman. She was not pretty or clever, she was not amusing! And he knew perfectly well that most of his conversation and the things he knew were right above her understanding and only left her humbly confused.

He thought of all the girls he had known and made love to—Tankerton's blue-eyed sister, Rosa Flint, his cousin, and a score of others.

His life had been full of short-lived but hectic episodes, which had quickly flared up into a great flame, and as quickly burnt themselves out again.

But his love for Minnie had always been there, burning through his life like the steady light of a candle, unobtrusive, yet never failing, though often in the glare of more sordid passions for a time it had been almost eclipsed.

It was the best thing in his life, and he knew that it always would be, and yet . . .

"What are you doing with yourself nowadays?" Minnie asked with an effort. She was vaguely conscious of something disquieting in his mood, and was nervously anxious to expel it.

William came back to his chair.

"I've left Cambridge, of course—didn't you know? Yes, I left five months ago. I'm studying for the law."

"Oh! And do you like it?"

William made a grimace.

"As well as I like work of any sort."

She did not take him seriously.

"Some day you'll be a great K.C.," she said with enthusiasm. "Why, you might even sit on the Woolsack."

William chuckled.

"I'm afraid, even in my wildest dreams, I've never aspired to that," he said. "I know my limitations and try to respect them."

Minnie shook her head; her eyes were glowing.

"You're too modest," she reproached him.

"And you're too kind—you think too well of me," he answered.

She turned away, bending to put more coal on the fire, and William watched her with moody eyes. He would have given a great deal to go to her and put his arms round her and say, "I love you, I've always loved you," and yet something restrained him. Too strong a prudence, too cautious a strain, which ran like a streak of alloy through all that was best in him, kept him from speaking the words that would have changed both their lives.

But presently, realising her silence, he asked gently:

"What are you thinking about, Minnie?"

And Minnie roused herself, and turned with a faint smile on her lips as she told him.

"I was thinking about that night, oh, years ago now! The summer night we first met—when we quarrelled, and you brought me the chocolates. Do you remember?"

"Yes, and you called me a swanker."

"It was horrid of me."

"It was true. I was an insufferable prig in those days."

Minnie's eyes grew dreamy.

"And do you remember the winding-sheet in the candle? I've often seen them since, and thought of what you said. I don't know why it suddenly came into my mind again."

"I remember everything."

His eyes softened as he looked at her. Surely

it was but yesterday that they had been boy and girl together; but yesterday that she had worn her hair in long strait plaits and leaned out of the bedroom window to smile down upon him.

He half rose as if to go to her, then checked himself, clenching his hands on the chair-back, trying to silence the voice at his heart which kept urging that he and she had been made for each other—that he loved her, and that she surely must love him; trying to remember only that she was not the type of woman to help him make a success of life, and that if they married he would soon grow weary of her and of her limitations.

She knew nothing of life, or of the world; she possessed nothing but the homely knowledge which she had picked up at Walton, or on her occasional seaside holidays. Supposing they married and it proved to be a failure? William hated making a failure of anything.

Aunt Louise, coming into the room at that moment, put an end to further conversation. She monopolised William for the remainder of the evening and during supper; she poured out her woes to him, mercilessly criticising her brother-in-law. She averred that all her life had been sacrificed to him and to his family—she said that there was no such thing as gratitude in the world, and she looked hard at Minnie as she said it.

William took his leave as soon as possible. He asked Minnie to walk to the station with him.

She hesitated, looking at her aunt. "There's mother . . ."

Aunt Louise laughed unkindly.

"This is not the first time I have been left with your mother," she said.

Minnie turned to the door. "I will go and put on my hat."

"Aunt Louise does not improve with keeping," William said dryly as they walked to the station.

Minnie laughed and shook her head.

"Poor auntie! I am afraid she has never been very happy."

"Selfish people cannot expect to be," William said severely.

There was a crescent moon high over the trees in the darkening sky, and Minnie pointed to it and stopped.

"You ought to turn your money and wish."

She heard the clink of coin in William's pocket before he asked:

"What did you wish?"

She laughed. "The same thing I always wish for, but it has not come true yet."

"Tell me what it is."

She shook her head. "No, because if I do it will never come true at all."

They were at the station then, and the train was in. William grasped Minnie's hand; he was glad that there was no time for a prolonged good-

bye. "I shall see you again soon," he said hurriedly.

"Yes."

He pressed her hand hard.

"Good-bye," and he was gone.

Chapter VI

IT was less than a month before Minnie saw William again, but in the meantime she had met Peter Laleham, and he had fallen in love with her.

Now Peter was a big, breezy sort of person, with the heart of a schoolboy and the body of a giant, and, incidentally, he was very handsome. Minnie met him at a dull church bazaar, whither he had been dragged, an unwilling victim, by his mother, and he looked like a sulky schoolboy who has been denied a half-holiday—until the vicar, for no particular reason, introduced him to Minnie.

He bowed stiffly, hardly glancing at her, and for some seconds they stood side by side staring at a woman in a much feathered hat who was vainly trying to persuade an old gentleman that the only thing in life left to desire was a hideous patchwork tea-cosy, until Minnie asked abruptly:

"Why did you come?"

Peter turned and looked down at her in very much the same way as a good-tempered mastiff will regard an impertinent kitten, then for the first time that afternoon he smiled.

"The Lord alone knows!" he said irreverently. "Why did you?"

Minnie laughed and explained.

"I came because mother is ill and could not come, and she thought it the right thing for one of us to put in an appearance."

"I see. Frightful bore doing the right thing, isn't it?"

"Frightful," Minnie agreed.

She felt quite at home with Peter. There was nothing superior or super-wise about him as there was about William the Third, and when presently he asked her to come and have some tea she agreed readily.

So they sat on rickety chairs in a stiffling marquee, and ate stale buns and drank washy tea, and Minnie thought Peter the handsomest man she had ever seen.

He was very tall for one thing, and she liked tall men, and he had thick brown hair with a charming kink in it, which, as she learned later, he vainly did his best to get rid of, and blue eyes, and the most wonderfully chiselled nose and chin.

And with it all he was very manly looking, although he talked and joked like a schoolboy and made her laugh a great deal.

"Do you live in Walton?" Minnie asked, and he shook his head and said:

"No, thank God!" And when she asked why he was at the bazaar then, he explained that the vicar was his mother's brother, and that they had come as a duty.

"He's not a bad old codger for a parson," he said kindly, "and if only he wouldn't insist on running shows like this I could really get quite fond of him."

Then he asked Minnie's name, making the usual excuse that he never could catch names when he was introduced to anyone, and when she told him, he repeated it thoughtfully.

"Minnie! I like it. It's uncommon and quaint. It reminds me——" he stopped and rubbed his chin reflectively. "I forget, but anyway, it reminds me of something old-fashioned."

"I think I am old-fashioned myself," Minnie told him smilingly, and he said, if she was, it was a pleasant change, as he was sick to death of the modern girl, with her slang and her way of running after men.

"Well, I don't do that, anyway," Minnie said. And she thought of William the Third with a little pang. Would she have succeeded any better with him, she wondered, if she had been more like the modern girl?

They finished tea and went the round of the stalls, and Peter was badgered into the purchase of a painted table-centre and two pegs covered with padding and woolwork, which he was gravely assured was a most useful pipe-rack!

"You'll have to allow me to present you with the table-centre thing, Miss Atherton," he said solemnly to Minnie. "If you think I'm going to

hawk it round all the afternoon and evening . . . Please! for the good of the cause."

So Minnie took it and was very pleased, because she so seldom received a present, and because it was a very nice table-centre indeed.

And when she left, long before the bazaar was closed, Peter walked halfway home with her, and said that he hoped they would meet again.

And Minnie said, "Yes, she hoped so too," and after they had parted she turned once to look after Peter's tall figure, and found that he, too, was turning to look after her.

And Minnie flushed with vexation and almost ran the rest of the way home. "Whatever made me do that?" she wondered. "I don't suppose I shall ever see him again."

But she did, many times, for during the next fortnight Peter seemed suddenly to take a great liking to his uncle, and came down—ostensibly—to visit him on three separate occasions, always finding his way through the town to call on Minnie, and remaining to tea or supper, or whatever meal happened to form a plausible excuse for prolonging his visit.

And so it happened that Peter was in the house the night Minnie's mother died, and he rose gallantly to the girl's assistance, proving that he could be a man indeed, in spite of all his boyish nonsense.

Mrs. Atherton died very suddenly at the last,

and Peter was in the stiff, unfriendly dining-room —where William Winter had sat years before and listened to Minnie's bad elocution—listening in his turn to Mr. Atherton's bitter railing against Fate and wondering why Minnie was absent for so long, when suddenly he heard her running steps outside, and then suddenly the door burst open, and she came in, white faced and wild eyed, her hands outstretched before her.

"Mother . . . mother . . ." She could hardly speak, and Peter instinctively sprang up and went to her, taking those outstretched hands in his kind clasp and holding them fast.

"Mother . . . mother's . . . dead." Minnie gasped and began to sob—dry, tearless sobs—clinging fast to Peter as if he alone could protect her from the shock she had just received.

"Dead!" Her father echoed the word in a sort of snarl, more as if he were angry with the Fate that had served him this second blow than from any deeper feeling.

He passed Minnie as if he had not seen her and went out of the room and upstairs, leaving the door wide open behind him.

Peter put an arm round Minnie and drew her to him. He attempted no consolation; he just let her alone till the worst anguish had passed, and she began to speak in little broken sentences.

"I saw her die. . . . I was there alone with her . . . she seemed quite well. . . . She asked

me if you were staying to supper . . . then it happened!"

She clung to Peter, shaking from head to foot. She had never seen death before, and she felt as if every sensitive nerve in her body had been torn and set throbbing and quivering beneath the touch of some cold, mysterious hand.

"I saw her die!" she said again brokenly. "She was smiling at me . . . and then . . . it was as if someone pulled a shutter down over her face, wiping out her life. Oh, mother, poor mother!"

Then Peter put his other arm round her, too, holding her slender body close to him, as if to protect her even against her own grief, and he said huskily:

"It's all right, dear. I'm here! You can hold on to me."

And Minnie did hold on to him, with the feeling that he was the one sane thing in a world that had gone suddenly mad and which was trying to destroy her.

And ten days later, when the blinds were all drawn up again, and Aunt Louise had finally quarrelled with her brother-in-law because he would not allow her to touch anything that had belonged to his wife, and had taken herself off without a word of farewell to anyone, Peter Laleham asked Minnie to marry him.

They were in the drawing-room, and Minnie

was standing at the window looking out at the drive, where the wheel-marks of the hearse that had taken her mother away were still deeply marked in the gravel, and the rain was falling softly, pattering against the windowpane every now and then with little petulant sounds, as big Peter Laleham put his hands on her shoulders, and turning her gently round to him, said:

"I want to marry you, Minnie. I want you to be my wife more than I want anything on earth. Will you have me?"

And Minnie's heart seemed to miss a beat, and a name leapt to her lips in a frightened sort of way—"William!" But she knew that it was useless thinking of him; he had not even answered the letter she had written telling him of her mother's death. So she searched about in her troubled mind for another excuse.

"I couldn't leave father. He's only got me."

Peter did not like Mr. Atherton, in fact he most heartily disliked him, but he hid his feelings manfully as he answered:

"You won't have to leave him. He can live with us."

Tears swam into Minnie's eyes.

"Oh, do you really mean it?" she faltered, and then when he said: "Of course. The old chap will be more than welcome if he likes to come," Minnie's tears overflowed, and she sobbed out: "Oh, I think you are the kindest man that ever

lived; nobody has ever been so kind to me as you have."

Peter's handsome face flushed.

"I'd do anything in the world for you," he said, and meant it.

But Minnie would not give him her answer then. At the back of her mind was a vague belief that some miracle might still happen in regard to William; that by some miracle the wish she had wished with every new moon for years might yet come true.

But the days dragged by and nothing happened! And no answer came to her letter; and Mr. Atherton's examination for bankruptcy came and went, and left him with hardly a shilling to his name, a soured and broken man.

The house and furniture were put up for sale, and Minnie was at her wits' end to know what to do.

An appeal to her sister failed.

Isabel, in an expensive frock and new black furs, shrugged her shoulders.

"How on earth can we help you? We've hardly enough to exist on ourselves."

Minnie looked at the new furs, and rose, fastening the collar of her own worn coat.

"I'm sorry I troubled you," she faltered.

An appeal to Ronald in California met with no more success.

"My dear girl, I'm broke to the wide, always

am, always have been, always shall be," he wrote. "If I'd got any money to pay his fare, I'd have the guv'nor out here, but I haven't a red cent," and he went on at length to describe what a good time he was having and how many friends he had made. "It seems to me if you want a good time, England's the place to get out of now," he wrote, "I've had the time of my life since I landed here——"

Minnie read no more. She put the letter away and went up to her room, where she sat for a long time in the dark with her eyes shut and her hands clasped hard together in her lap, while she went back, slowly and deliberately, over her long, disconnected friendship with William, asking herself honestly if he had ever once given her cause to think that he liked her even a little bit more than most men liked most girls, and she knew that he had not!

For years he had never even kissed her; and since their school days he had not spoken or written a single word that could have been misconstrued into anything beyond their face value.

And at last, when the battle was fought and won, Minnie went downstairs and wrote to Peter Laleham to tell him that she would like to marry him if he still wanted her.

And Peter begged half a day off from the stockbroker's office where he was employed and came down as fast as the train and his own long

legs could bring him. But when he saw Minnie he was choked by a sudden emotion and could not speak, so he just took her into his arms and held her fast against his throbbing heart, till presently he managed to stammer out:

"I love you . . . I will be good to you."

And Minnie said: "I will be good to you too, Peter."

And so tney became engaged.

Chapter VII

PETER'S mother, the vicar's sister, received the news of her son's engagement to Minnie with the calmness of keen disappointment.

He was her only son, and she was a widow! And she had had dreams of a great marriage for him.

"With his handsome face, Peter should have married a beauty, or an heiress," so she bemoaned to her brother, "but this Minnie Atherton is nothing to look at and her father is a bankrupt."

The vicar cleared his throat.

"Miss Atherton is at any rate a lady," he ventured, not liking to add that it had always been his own private conviction that Peter's choice would fall either upon a golden-haired barmaid or a chorus girl.

Mrs. Laleham looked contemptuous.

"A lady!" she scoffed. "Everyone knows nowadays that breeding is nothing!"

But she was kind to Minnie, even though she took good care to make her understand that there was no money attaching to her handsome son.

"Peter is only a young man, and although he is doing quite well, he is, of course, not rich.

That he will do great things in the future I am confident, but in the meantime you will have to begin in a small way at the bottom of the ladder."

Minnie smiled.

"I've never had any money of my own, and I am sure we shall be quite happy at the bottom of the ladder," she said quaintly.

Whereupon Mrs. Laleham melted a little and kissed her.

"Peter loves you, I know that," she admitted, "and if you are good to him and make him happy, that is all I ask."

"I will be good to him," Minnie promised.

The wedding was to be hurried on.

"There is nothing to wait for," Peter said, "and I've heard of the cutest little house at Chiswick——"

He had already bought the house, although he did not tell Minnie until he had persuaded her that long engagements were useless and silly, and had made her consent to marry him at once!

"At once!" she gasped.

"Well, say in a fortnight's time," he answered. "I can get a special licence, and——" he laughed. "I've bought the little house at Chiswick," he added in boyish triumph.

Minnie loved the little house; she was like a child with a new toy when Peter took her over it; she made eager plans for its furnishing and decorating; she was especially anxious for her fa-

ther's room to be comfortable and as much like his own home as possible.

Peter watched her with adoring eyes; she was not in the least as he had pictured his wife, but now he believed that she was everything he had always dreamed of and desired.

As they were coming down the narrow, low little staircase, so low that Peter almost had to stoop, Minnie turned and looked up at him with timid eyes. "Peter, dear."

"Minnie darling!" said Peter.

She slipped a hand into his.

"I can bring Quartus, can't I?"

"Quartus!" He frowned, then laughed. "Oh, you mean the old dog! Why, or course."

She gave a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank you. I could not be happy without him."

Peter squeezed her fingers.

"Where did you get his ridiculous name from?" he asked.

Minnie turned her head away.

"His real name was 'Four,' because he was the fourth puppy," she explained, "and a friend of mine changed it to 'Quartus' because it was Latin."

"Oh!" Peter looked at her averted face. "A *man* friend?" he demanded in pretended jealousy.

"Yes," said Minnie.

They went down to the little square hall again, and Peter put an arm round her.

"Really—*only* a friend?" he asked earnestly.

She turned her head and smiled up at him. "Really only a friend, Peter," she said gently. "I've never had anyone love me—not a man, I mean—till you came."

Peter whistled.

"Whew! What were all the men thinking about?" he demanded.

But there was still something else she had to say to him, and she said it as they rode back to London on top of an omnibus.

"Peter!"

"My darling."

She was flushed and distressed as she met his eyes.

"Peter . . . I haven't . . . I mean, I can't have any new clothes to get married in! You see . . ."—and now she looked away—"we've hardly got any money, father and I, and it wouldn't seem right if I——" She broke off, to add humbly: "I hope you won't mind. You see, I had just had a new costume when mother . . . and so I had to have it dyed black." She touched her coat. "This is it. I don't think it looks so bad, do you?" she submitted wistfully.

Peter's eyes were very tender as he looked at her, and something in their expression at that moment reminded Minnie of William the Third's,

although his were brown and Peter's the deepest blue-grey, as he answered:

"I should love you just as well if you were in sackcloth or rags!"

Minnie smiled and moved a little nearer to him on the narrow bus seat.

"I'm so glad," she said happily.

She really was happy—happy because Peter's was the best, almost the only love she had ever known; happy because at last she had someone of her own to care for her. She was proud of her engagement ring; intensely proud of the little house at Chiswick; and very proud of big, handsome Peter. Of William she did her best never to think; he belonged to the past, and the past could not come again.

So the time passed pleasantly enough until two days before she and Peter were to be married. Minnie was walking down the road in the afternoon, with Quartus ambling rather slowly beside her, dreaming of the fortnight's honeymoon she was to have at Eastbourne, when she looked up suddenly to see William the Third coming towards her.

He looked pale and a little agitated, and his first words were:

"I've been abroad. I only got your letter this morning, and I came down at once."

Regardless of the fact that they were in the main road he took her hand and held it.

"Minnie, I'm so sorry about your mother. You know I would have come down at once if I'd been in England. I don't know why my letters were not sent on."

Minnie found her voice with a supreme effort. She felt dazed with the shock of this unexpected meeting.

"It doesn't matter. People were very kind."

"But it does matter," he insisted. "I ought to have been here." He looked at her and saw the stiffness of her pale face. "You have a perfect right to be angry," he added quickly.

Minnie took her hand away.

"I am not angry," she said. There was a little silence, then she asked: "Were you coming to see us? Because, if so, I will come back with you. I was only taking Quartus for a walk."

He answered offendedly that there was nobody else in Walton whom he would be likely to trouble about.

"No, of course not," Minnie said, and thought of the day when she had gone to Rosa Flint's and found him there.

They walked back to the house silently; a dismantled, desolate house now, with a glaring "To be Sold" board leaning drunkenly against a yellow painted gate post.

William stood still when he saw it.

"You are selling the house?" he asked sharply.

Minnie smiled in faint amusement.

"*We* are not! It's our creditors," she told him. She led the way in. "It's not very comfortable," she apologised. "We are just living in the breakfast-room till Wednesday——" Then she drew a long, sharp breath as she remembered all that Wednesday was bringing to her, and all that she had forgotten since she met William a few moments ago.

The breakfast-room carpet was up, and all pictures and ornaments gone. William looked around him with resentful eyes; he felt a personal sense of outrage at the ruthless stripping of this house which he had known for so many years.

Minnie turned to the door.

"Father is out, and we have no maid. If you don't mind waiting I'll go and make some tea."

William moved between her and the door.

"I don't want any tea. I want to tell you something."

There was a determined look in his eyes and a different tone in his voice that touched Minnie with a strange fear, although she did not understand what it was that she feared, so that she moved backward a step from him, her hands outstretched to ward him off, as she said breathlessly:

"Oh, please! I want to tell you something first. I want to tell you——" She caught her breath and rushed on: "I'm engaged. . . . I'm going to

be married . . . I'm going to be married the day after to-morrow."

She dare not look at him as she spoke or she would have seen in his eyes the betrayal which she dreaded he would read in hers; but during the seconds that raced away William recovered his self-control, and his voice was very much the same as usual when he spoke.

"It's very sudden, isn't it? Why didn't you tell me when I was here a month ago?"

"Because there wasn't anything to tell."

"You mean——? Oh, but surely things can't have been arranged in such a short time?"

"They were," said Minnie. "I had never seen Peter when you were here a month ago."

And then a silence fell, which neither of them seemed capable of breaking, till with another murmured word about tea Minnie slipped past him and went out into the kitchen.

She put the kettle on the gas-ring and stood idly watching it. She felt curiously numbed and detached, as if she were looking on at the emotions of someone else.

Presently she heard William's step in the empty hall, and a moment later he came into the kitchen behind her.

"Does the kettle boil?"

"Not yet."

She did not look round, and William sat down

on the end of the kitchen table and began to fill his pipe.

After a moment:

"Peter—what?" he asked abruptly.

"Laleham, Peter Laleham."

"What is he?"

"A stockbroker, I think."

"How old?"

"Twenty-eight."

"And you are to be married the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wish you every happiness, Minnie."

"Thank you."

Would the kettle never boil? She tried to turn the gas higher, and in her agitation nearly turned it out, and when a fine trail of steam and a violent rumbling announced that the water boiled at last, her hand shook so as she tried to fill the teapot that she splashed it all over her wrist and fingers.

"Oh!"

She put the kettle down hurriedly with a cry of pain, and William jumped off the table and came quickly to her.

"What's the matter? Have you scalded yourself?"

"Only a little—it's nothing." She tried to prevent him from taking her hand, but it was useless, and he held it fast with gentle fingers.

"Poor little hand!" said William, looking down at the angry red mark, and bending, touched it gently with his lips.

Minnie tried to laugh, then broke down and cried.

"It h-hurts so!" she managed to say between sobs. "I know I'm silly, but it h-hurts so."

But it was the touch of his lips that had hurt her more than the scalding water; the touch of his lips that had sent her blood tingling in a way that none of Peter's passionate caresses had ever had the power to do.

And William cursed himself and his folly as he stood there, cut to the heart by her tears and realising for the first time all that he had thrown away. Perhaps had he spoken before, she might have grown to love him as he loved her, but now it was too late. He had had his chance a month ago and let it pass. With a supreme effort he pulled himself together.

"Oil is a good thing for a burn, isn't it? or butter? Where do you keep them? Let me see, isn't the pantry this way?"

He went off to rummage, and Minnie dried her tears ashamedly. When he came back with a pat or margarine on a plate, which was all that he could find, she managed to laugh.

"It's not as bad as all that. I was silly to cry."

She stood very still while he smeared some of the grease on her wrist, and bound it round with

a soft silk handkerchief of his own. Then he made the tea, while Minnie got the cups and saucers together.

"Let's have it here, shall we?" he suggested. "I like tea in the kitchen. . . . Do you remember——?"

Then he broke off, realising that he was on dangerous ground and that there were many things which he must remember no longer.

"And what's this wonderful stockbroker like?" he enquired after a moment with an effort. "And am I to be invited to the wedding?"

Minnie bit her lip to hide its trembling.

"We're not asking anyone, only father and Mrs. Laleham. It's to be very quiet. I'm going to be married in my old clothes!"

William wondered if she had ever had any new ones; for as far back as he could remember she had always appeared in her sister's discarded frocks, or in something which had been made at home.

He looked at her, and quickly away again. There were childish tear stains on her cheeks, and a long end of hair had escaped from its pins and was dangling untidily down her back, reminding him irrelevantly of a summer's day many years ago, when she had run up the beach away from him and her sun-bonnet had fallen off.

It was a long cry back to those days—

"The eternal dawn, without a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And shall put all stars and candles out,
Ere we be young again."

The lines which Minnie had recited so badly that wet Saturday afternoon flashed through his mind, and for the first time in his life he felt as if youth was indeed slipping away from him, and as if when he parted from Minnie this afternoon he would have left it behind him for ever.

And she went on, finding speech less difficult than silence:

"We've got a little house at Chiswick—only a tiny one, of course, but it will be very nice, I think. Father is going to live with us."

"You must ask me to come and see you," William said.

She made no reply to that; perhaps she felt that he had no more desire to come than she had to invite him.

They finished the tea, and William packed the things on to a tray and carried them out into the scullery.

"I'll wash them up, if you like," he volunteered, but Minnie would not hear of it. So they went back into the morning-room, and William walked over to the window and stared out at the setting sun and the crooked "To be Sold" board. He knew that a large part of his life would end with

the selling of this house and with Minnie's marriage, and yet he felt himself powerless to stem the tide which had carried them on so swiftly during the past month.

He turned round and looked at Minnie as she stood by the table absently turning the pages of a magazine, and his eyes took in every detail of her thin, badly dressed figure and pale face. He had never thought her pretty, and yet now that he was about to lose her for ever he could see beauty in every line of her face and unformed limbs. What a fool he had been! He who had always thought himself so wise.

He took out his watch and looked vaguely at it.

"Do you know how the trains go? I ought to be getting back."

Minnie looked up, her pale face flushing.

"Won't you stay for supper? Father will be in soon."

She knew that there was only bread and cheese in the house, and although she longed for him to stay, she dreaded that he would accept. She would not have believed him had he told her that he would rather eat bread and cheese in the kitchen with her than share a banquet with anyone else. Her estimate of William the Third had always been hopelessly incoherent and incomplete; perhaps through his own fault! And she loved him none the less because she thought him

selfish and egotistical, and not always quite sincere.

But William would not stay to supper; he had promised to dine with a man in town, he said, and he would go along to the station and chance a train.

He did not ask Minnie to walk with him this time, and they said good-bye at the front door, with Quartus sprawling beside them on the path, diligently hunting for a flea.

"It looks like rain," William said, and Minnie said: "Yes, I think it does."

"Well, in case it does, I'll be getting along," William said again, and Minnie said: "Yes, I should," and put cold little fingers into his warm hand.

"Good-bye," she said, almost in a whisper.

It was too dark to see William's face clearly, but she felt his lips on her hand once again, and heard him say: "God bless you," before he turned and walked away.

Chapter VIII

MINNIE afterwards felt that she only really began to grow up from her wedding-day, for it seemed definitely to mark the place where she tore the book of her life in halves, and went on down the road in new and strange company. Not that Peter Laleham was any different to what she had always thought him to be. He was kind and loving in the same way that a big schoolboy is kind and loving; a little uncouth in his caresses and in his expressions of affection, and a little inclined to be ashamed of that affection. But from the first moment to the last of their married life his love and loyalty to Minnie never wavered, though he was often difficult, and sometimes a little selfish, and sometimes even a little unkind.

Their first trouble arose over the presence of Minnie's father in the house, for Mr. Atherton had never been an easy man to live with, and trouble had made him more difficult. He missed his own large house and grumbled at the small rooms in which he found himself; he missed going to business every day, and did not know how to pass the long hours away. So he took to frequenting a local hotel and spent many hours at

the billiard-table, often coming home the worse for drink, to which Peter strongly objected.

"It's not respectable," he declared indignantly, when half in tears Minnie tried to defend her father. "And I won't have it! I don't want to be hard on the old chap, but one must draw the line somewhere."

Minnie tried to intimate as much to Mr. Atherton, but the only result was a row between the two men, during which Minnie stood shivering in the tiny hall, wondering what the end of it would be, till her father came out with a face purple with passion and slammed the door behind him. He and Peter certainly shook hands in the morning, but the same thing happened again and again so many times that Minnie lost heart and grew to dread the sound of her father's uncertain steps up the tiny garden path, until—about six months after her marriage—he caught a chill and retired to bed, never leaving it again until he was carried out in his coffin.

Peter was filled with boyish remorse.

"I wish I'd been more tolerant," he told Minnie. "After all, he was your father and he'd had a rough time, poor old chap! I might have been kinder to him."

"I think you were very kind," she answered gently. "I think you did everything you could for him, Peter."

She did not like to admit that the old man's

death was a relief to her, but it undoubtedly was. She had nursed him devotedly and at a time when she herself was far from strong and had often felt ready to drop with fatigue, and now it was all over, the only thing left to desire seemed perfect rest and quiet.

Peter, worried with business, was not always as kind or considerate as he might have been, and often grew irritable and impatient with his wife's amateurish efforts at housekeeping. He could not, for instance, understand her indifferent management, or her inability to be economical with his money.

"My mother is so different," he once said, frowning at Minnie. "Everything at home is always run by clockwork." This was when the little daily maid was out and he had been kept waiting half an hour for supper, which, when it arrived, was badly cooked.

Minnie managed to smile.

"I'm not clever like your mother," she said patiently. "And I'm afraid my clockwork often runs down."

She had never had any experience with money or the management of a house, and although she did her best, it was a poor best, and she was bitterly conscious of the fact. And then one night she and Peter had their first real quarrel. Peter was hunting through a drawer for some papers when he came across a pathetic little bundle of

housekeeping bills for which Minnie had been unable to find the money to pay, and with a face like a thundercloud he took them to her and demanded an explanation.

Minnie had none to offer except the one he already knew, that she was a bad manager.

"I try to be careful, Peter," she pleaded, "but the money seems to melt away."

Peter was really angry.

"If I were a rich man it would not matter!" he stormed, "but I'm not, and never shall be if you go on at this rate. You must be more careful. It's not as if you were a child. You're old enough to know better."

He did not mean to be unkind; neither did he realise how much he had said till, to his horror, Minnie, overtired and ill as she was, burst into tears and ran out of the room.

Peter's first impulse was to rush after her, then he remembered an entirely gratuitous piece of information which had been given to him by a senior clerk in the office concerning the management of a wife, and so he stayed where he was.

"Begin as you mean to go on," the senior clerk had said. "Be firm to start with, my boy. It doesn't do to let women have their own way."

So Peter stayed where he was, tormented with remorse, and the longing to say he was sorry, while Minnie went out into the dark little kitchen

and sat on the cold floor with her arms round the shaggy neck of old Quartus and sobbed.

She had heard her father speak just as roughly to her mother on many occasions, but it had never occurred to her that the day would come when Peter would prove himself no better than her father, probably no better than any other husband.

She wished with all her heart that she had never seen him; she wished with all her heart that she had never got married, and for the first time for months she thought of William Winter, and longed for him. Not that he had ever been anything to her, but because he stood in her life for first love, and for romance, and for everything which she knew now could never wholly be hers. William would never have spoken to her like that; William would always have been kind and gentle, she was sure! That is where she was wrong, for, of course, in the same circumstances William would have been exactly the same as any other husband, only she did not realise it.

So she sobbed against the dog's shaggy head until half an hour later, the advice of the senior clerk entirely forgotten, Peter found her. He stooped and picked her up in his arms as if she had been a child, carrying her into the light and warmth of the little sitting-room.

"Darling, I'm so sorry. I was a brute!

Minnie, you'll catch your death of cold. Your hands are like ice."

And Minnie, unnerved and miserable, sobbed out that she wished she could die, and during the next week she very nearly did, for her baby was born prematurely and only lived an hour, and for three days it seemed very likely that Minnie would die too.

But she struggled round the corner and came out into the sunshine of life again, very wan and listless and full of a weary wonder as to why she had been allowed to live.

Peter was devotion itself in those days. There was nothing he would not do for her—nothing he would not give her. He was consumed with the dread of losing her, and when at last his mother and the doctor persuaded him that he could safely go back to the office, he came racing home early in the evening, breathless and terrified, to ask the panting question, "How is she?" and to mutter a fervid, "Thank God," when he heard that Minnie was steadily improving.

But her convalescence was slow; slower than it should have been, the doctor said, for when the summer had come and gone she still looked frail and listless. Peter watched her with puzzled eyes, wondering if it was merely his imagination that told him she had changed and that she would never be the same again.

"Don't you love me any more?" he asked her

one night in hurt, boyish fashion, when she had gently repulsed his caresses, and, flushing slightly, Minnie answered:

"Of course I do, Peter, only I'm so—tired!"

Then the tears had welled into her eyes and overflowed.

Peter went on his knees beside her, encircling her with his arms.

"Minnie, are you fretting—about the—baby?" he asked diffidently.

She turned her head away, but not before he had seen her lip quiver.

"I should like him to—have lived," she said in a whisper.

He kissed her cheek half shyly. "Darling, we can have another kiddie—some day?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to have any more."

Her answer chilled him—drove him back on himself, and he rose to his feet half offendedly.

"I can't understand you," he said.

She could not understand herself either, and did not know why she was unhappy. She had less care and responsibility than she had ever had, and Peter no longer complained of her bad management or extravagance, and yet . . .

"I'm wicked! I'm ungrateful!" she told herself every day in bitter reproach. "I've got everything to be thankful for, everything to make me happy, and yet I can't be happy."

Peter's mother had been kind to her. She had stayed in the house all the time Minnie was ill, and the girl missed her very much when she went away.

"Why must you go?" she asked wistfully when Mrs. Laleham announced her intended departure. "Why can't you stay? I like having you here."

Mrs. Laleham laughed and kissed her.

"Peter must be tired of me even if you are not," she said. "Peter must want his home and his wife to himself."

So, like the wise woman she was, she went away, and Minnie began the struggle of picking up the threads of life again unaided. She had changed very much in appearance since her illness; the immature, girlish look had gone, and she seemed to have grown taller.

"You've begun to grow up at last, that's what it is," Peter chaffed her. "You were nothing but a child when I married you."

"I wish I was still a child then," Minnie said and her thoughts went to William with a swift pang of remembrance. She had always felt young with him. Where was he now? And what great things was he doing with his life? She had not seen or heard from him since her marriage more than a year ago, and at last she had begun to put him quite definitely out of her life.

The past had gone, and William with it. She was married—she had had a baby and known the

grief of its loss, and now life was mapped out for her with Peter Laleham—dear Peter!

She looked across the room at him with softened eyes—he was her husband, and she loved him—not perhaps as she had always meant to love the man she married, but still with a good enough love, which had for its foundation much of the maternal and a great loyalty.

Peter was bending over a sheaf of papers, and there was a frown between his handsome eyes when suddenly he looked up at his wife.

"I knew I was right about these shares!" he said triumphantly. "They've risen three points to-day."

Minnie did not understand anything to do with the Exchange, or the risks and excitement which govern the life of a stockbroker, but she always did her best to say the right thing, and thereby to please Peter, so she said now:

"How clever of you! Mow many did you buy?"

"Buy!" Peter laughed cynically. "I didn't buy any. I've got no money." Then he threw her a swift, apologetic smile. "I could make thousands if I'd only got the capital!" he said enthusiastically.

Minnie flushed.

"I've cost you a lot lately, Peter dear."

He rose and came quickly to her. "I'd rather

have you than all the money in the world," he said, and he meant it.

"But it would be nice to have *both!*" she submitted.

"*Very* nice," Peter agreed.

Minnie lay awake that night thinking of her husband's words and wishing she could help him.

She knew he was often worried about business; she knew that she and her father had both been a great expense, and therefore a drag on him since her marriage.

"If I could only make some money," she thought wistfully. "If only I were clever enough to make some!"

And when at last she did fall asleep, she had a curious dream that she was turning the pages of a book, and that when at last she closed it and looked for the name of the author on the cover, it was her own name!

MINNIE ATHERTON.

It stared solemnly up at her in gold lettering, and the strange part of it was that it all seemed quite usual and natural and that she felt no surprise.

And in the morning, when she realised her dream, with the memory of it came a sudden thought:

"Why shouldn't I try to write a book?"

The sheer daring of the thought drove the

blood to her cheeks. Write a book! She who had never been able even to pass a simple school examination—and upon whose meagre learning William Winter had poured out his scorn! What would he say if he knew? What would he think?

She sat very still for a long time, her eyes glowing, her hands clasped in her lap—lost in thought, trying to make up her mind, and then all at once she knew that it was already made up, that it had really been made up ever since the moment in the dream when she read her name on the cover of the book. She *would* try! She could but fail! But she would try.

Then followed days and weeks of absorption and intense interest and excitement.

Peter was told nothing, but in his man's vague way he realised that something had happened at last to rouse his wife from her lethargy, and he wondered idly what it could be. And then one morning early in the following spring he knew.

It happened at breakfast time.

The little maid of all work, who lived in now. had just brought the bacon and the coffee-pot and gone out of the room, closing the door behind her, when Minnie sprang to her feet, breathless and flushed.

"Peter—I can't wait to tell you another moment."

Peter raised startled eyes from the financial page of *The Times*.

"To tell me what? Good heavens! what's the matter, my dear?" For Minnie was laughing and crying together and brandishing something which looked most suspiciously like a cheque.

"Peter! I made it! It's my very own! I made it with my own work! Look! Fifty pounds—a real fifty pounds, Peter! It's only on account of royalties, whatever that means! I may get a lot more! I may get even another hundred if the book sells. Of course, I know it won't! I know it will be a horrid failure, but all the same——" Here she broke down and wept from sheer excitement.

Peter rose to his feet, for a moment he really thought she had taken leave of her senses.

"If you're not mad—or if I'm not," he said with the deadly composure of a great agitation, "for God's sake explain what you are talking about."

Minnie explained.

Chapter IX

THE critics were most unkind to Minnie's first book; those of them who did not dismiss it with a few contemptuous lines, gave full play to their sarcasm and cheap cynicism.

"This book, which we are told is a first novel—by far the best part of it is the decidedly attractive jacket on the cover—is the usual old story of two men and a woman and a mistaken marriage. It has all the usual machine-made situations, and will doubtless prove highly popular with the little city typist who reads in the train or in the omnibus on her way to and from business."

Minnie read the paragraph with a sense of deadly hurt. She felt as if she had witnessed her first child being struck by a brutal hand, and not even a further kindly criticism brought home by Peter in an evening paper could quite soothe or comfort her.

" 'The End of the Day' "—so wrote someone who signed himself "Candide"—"if a first novel as its publishers claim, shows decided talent and promise of excellent work to come in the future. In spite of its obvious faulty and rather stereotyped situations, its author has the great gift of telling a story, and her characters are real people. Minnie Atherton should go far in her career, and we should not be surprised to see her develop into a well-deserved 'best-seller.' "

"Candide" proved himself a true prophet, for after hanging fire for a few weeks, "The End of the Day" suddenly began to sell, steadily at first, and then in ever-increasing numbers, till the publishers proudly boasted that they could not print copies quickly enough, and before the summer was over Minnie found herself famous.

Peter was a proud man.

"I always knew you were a clever women," he told his wife untruthfully. "You'll make a fortune if you go on like this."

Minnie's eyes shone.

"Oh, do you really think so?" she asked doubtfully. She had no confidence in herself, she still felt as if her success was as much of a dream as it had been when she first saw her name on the cover of the dream book.

It was not the money for which she was thankful, except for Peter's sake, but it was the wonderful new interest which had been given to her.

There were no lonely hours now, no depressing thoughts—she felt as if someone had shown her how to unlock a door in life which had hitherto always been closed, allowing her to walk at will into a new world all her own.

Peter took charge of most of the money she made and carefully invested it.

" 'Make hay while the sun shines,' is the finest motto in the English language," he declared. "I

don't want our money for myself; I only want to save it for you."

Minnie did not mind. She had great faith in Peter, and she had never been fond of money for its own sake; she had not yet awakened to a knowledge of the many things money can do, or the beauties of the world which it could show to her.

And at the end of the summer, when her book had just gone into its seventh edition, she did something which she had been intending to do for a long time; she sent a copy of it to William Winter, together with a careful selection of its reviews—including the one signed "Candide." Then she set herself to await results with an anxious heart.

She did not admit even to herself how greatly she had been influenced in the writing of the book by the desire to show William that she was not so dull as she believed he had always thought her.

She had looked up to him with an admiration that bordered on fear, and it seemed a wonderful thing that at last she had managed to plant her foot on even the lowest rung of the ladder of fame, at the summit of which her childish love had always faithfully placed him.

William took a fortnight to acknowledge the book, and she had begun to think it could not have reached him, when one afternoon a letter came addressed in his well-known writing.

William had beautiful handwriting, and Minnie stood for some moments with the envelope unopened in her hand, and with the queer feeling that the past had come back again. She had put it determinedly from her the day she married Peter, and lately she had grown to believe it was indeed dead and forgotten, but it had never seemed more real and alive than now, when she stood in the narrow hallway of Peter's house looking down at William's beautiful handwriting.

Then she slowly broke open the flap and read what he had written.

"My Dear Minnie,

"Thank you for the book and newspaper cuttings which I suppose came from you, although you did not honour me with a letter. I have been out of England for several months, or should probably have heard sooner of your success, as I have discovered since my return that 'The End of the Day' is so far the year's best seller! Dear, dear! To think of it. I suppose you will be too proud now to acknowledge your childhood's friend! Needless to say, I shall read the book with great interest, and later on, if I may, I will send along my humble criticism thereof! By the way, fair lady, have you heard that I am married? I hope it will not be long before I shall have the opportunity of introducing you to my wife, and trust that you and she will be great friends. Write and tell me all your news and remember me kindly to your husband, whom, by the way, I have never met.

"Yours,

"William."

Married! Minnie folded the letter with stiff fingers and put it back into its envelope.

William married! It seemed impossible, so im-

possible that she almost believed that he was just teasing her!

William married!

She went into the little dining-room and stared at herself in the glass.

A loose strand of hair had escaped from its pins and hung untidily down over her forehead.

William used to say that hers was the untidiest hair he had ever seen! She pinned the stray lock back mechanically.

What sort of a woman had he married, she wondered? And what sort of hair had she got?

William married! Somehow such a possibility had never occurred to her. Then her eyes caught the gleam of her wedding ring in the pale afternoon sunshine, and she remembered that she was married also!

Queer how sometimes Peter seemed to slip right out of her memory! Such a big person too! Not a man easily to be forgotten.

William married! . . . Well, she had her writing now, that was one comfort, and then she checked the thought, frightened of the emotion which had prompted it.

She had her writing and Peter! And she loved Peter—of course she loved Peter.

The old dog, Quartus, got up from the rug and yawned, and then came to her and pawed her dress as if asking for a little attention.

Minnie looked down at the dog and thought of

the Saturday afternoon when William had changed its name from "Four" to "Quartus," "because it sounds better." Years ago! Oh, years and years, and yet, surely it was only yesterday that she had stood in the dusky evening patiently holding the handlebars of William's bicycle while he laboured at the tyre pump.

Surely it was only yesterday that he had pushed her all the way home in a barrow from the wood where the primroses grew! Only yesterday that she had been so hurt and jealous when she found him in Rosa Flint's drawing-room.

Well, now he was married, and that was the end of the story—but still she stood for a long time looking back into the past, while the sunlight paled to grey twilight, and the twilight to dark, and it was only the sound of Peter's latchkey in the front door that at last roused her.

He came into the room groping his way through the darkness, stumbling against a chair before he struck a match with which to light the gas, and then he saw his wife!

"Why—Minnie!" he said amazed. "All in the dark? Is anything the matter?"

She shook her head, smiling faintly. "Nothing, Peter. I was only dreaming."

He lit the gas, then bent to kiss her. "Dreaming, eh? Another wonderful love story?"

Minnie's smile faded. "It might have been," was the thought in her heart, but she kept the thought to herself.

Chapter X

MINNIE wrote several replies to William's letter and destroyed them all. It had always been difficult for her to write to him, even when they were both children, and she found it a thousand times more difficult now.

When she wrote the words, "My Dear William," she had the vision of a stranger woman's face peering over his shoulder as he read them, and her pen was suddenly stilled.

Looking back on the years that were gone, it seemed as if there had always been some woman or another in his life pushing her into the background. Even as a boy in his teens he had bragged to her of his pretty cousin, and there must have been many others since besides those of whom she knew.

And now he was married! There was a woman who had the right to call herself his wife, and by his name—Mrs. William Winter.

Before she was aware of it Minnie's pen had idly scrawled the words across the blotting paper, and she looked down at them with a queer little smile in her eyes.

Somehow she had always thought that his name would be hers—if any woman's—even though he

had never by word or look given her reason to think so! It just showed how mistaken one could be!

Then she wrote beneath the other name, "Mrs. Peter Laleham," and that looked just as strange and as if she had never heard it before.

She wondered what William's wife was like! Pretty, of course, and young! That would go without saying. Very lively, too, no doubt, and clever and amusing. Minnie generously endowed her with every grace and virtue as she sat staring at her unfinished letter with a very real little ache at her heart. It hurt her because William had married; she had always looked upon him as her own exclusive property—and yet he had not given her the right to do so, and, after all, it was she who had got married first.

Presently she roused herself, tore up the unfinished letter and the blotting paper with the names written on it, and put the pen away.

She would not write to William at all—she had nothing to say to him and she did not wish to meet his wife. She put him determinedly from her mind, and went out into the kitchen to help the little maid make something nice for Peter's supper. And it was that night that Peter introduced the subject of Laura Sylvester.

"We've got a new man in our office," he said over his pipe after supper, "and when he heard that you were my wife he seemed awfully inter-

ested. Sylvester is his name, and Laura Sylvester is his sister."

Minnie repeated the words vaguely.

"Laura Sylvester. I don't know who she is."

Peter laughed comfortably.

"I didn't know myself till he told me," he admitted. "But she's an artist, and she did the original drawing for the cover of your book."

"Oh!" Minnie's eyes grew eager. She had always been especially fond of that cover, representing, as it did, a field of poppies over which the sun was setting and the lonely figure of a man making his way home along the narrow footpath.

The man reminded her a little of William—something in the square shoulders, something in the poise of his head.

"Sylvester says that his sister is awfully anxious to meet you," Peter went on with the offhandedness of a great pride. "He says she's awfully keen on the book."

"I should like to meet her," Minnie said quickly. "Perhaps we could ask them to supper."

"I'll wait a little while and see what sort of a chap he is," Peter answered cautiously. "No need to be in a hurry."

But Sylvester turned out to be all that he should be, and a fortnight later he and his sister came to spend an evening at the little Chiswick house, and that visit was the beginning of a very real friendship for Minnie. She had never had a woman

friend, but she and Laura Sylvester took to one another immediately.

"I knew I should like you," Laura said, her dark eyes a little shy and glowing. "I knew directly I read your book that I was bound to like the woman who wrote it."

"The critics have been very unkind to me," Minnie told her.

Laura made a little grimace.

"The critics! Pooh! Who cares for them?" she asked scornfully. "The public are your only critics, and they just love every word of it—as I do!"

"And your beautiful cover!" Minnie said. "I am sure it's more than half your cover they buy the book for."

Laura laughed.

"And now that we've both said nice things to one another, I hope it means that we are to be friends," she said, and held out her hand. "Does it?"

"I'm sure it does," Minnie answered.

Peter declared that it was merely a case of like attracting unlike."

"You're so totally different that a friendship between you seems almost impossible," he said.

The two girls certainly were different both physically and temperamentally. Laura was short and squarely built, with dark eyes and strong

resolute features, and Minnie was tall and slim with dreamy eyes and a thin, sensitive face.

And in character, for all Laura's genius and artistry, the two women were as totally opposed.

Laura had none of the sentimentalist in her composition. She lived peaceably in the world and accepted it as she found it, taking both happiness and trouble philosophically. She was largely tolerant and never passed judgment on anyone without first making very sure of her ground. The only person she really loved was her brother Lionel, until she met Minnie, and then she loved her also.

"Do you know," she said one day some months after the beginning of their friendship, when she was sitting over the fire with Minnie in the dusk of a winter's afternoon, "I should love to make a portrait of you!"

Minnie raised startled eyes.

"Of me!" she laughed. "What shocking taste! Now if you had said of Peter, I could sympathise better."

Laura lit a cigarette. She was a great smoker, and the fingers of her left hand were always stained with nicotine.

"I think Peter is the handsomest man I have ever seen," she agreed readily, "but I've never once felt that I should like to paint him. You see, he looks just what he is, if you understand what I

mean; he leaves nothing to the imagination. He hasn't got a story in his face—as you have."

"I'm not quite sure if that is a compliment or not," Minnie said dubiously. "What do you mean by a story?"

Laura considered.

"Well, it's difficult to explain," she admitted. "Though I know perfectly well myself what I mean. You've got the face of a person to whom things—thrilling things—happen."

Minnie laughed in great amusement.

"That's where you're quite wrong," she said positively, "because nothing thrilling has ever happened in my life at all—unless you count Peter."

Laura looked faintly disappointed.

"Not—*anything?*" she asked. "No other men? No love stories—or anything?"

Minnie shook her head.

"Positively, no—nothing," she said lightly. But she thought of William as she spoke.

Could she truthfully call him nothing? He who had been in her life so long?

Laura blew a cloud of smoke into the air and sighed with pensive resignation.

"Well, then, all the thrilling things must be lying in wait for you in the future," she declared. "Which reminds me, what about the new book?"

"It's finished. I sent it to the publisher to-day."

"And I've started on the jacket. You must see it to-morrow when you come round."

"I should love to."

"Lionel thinks it better than the one I did for 'The End of the Day.' "

"It must be good, then." Minnie answered absently—her thoughts were elsewhere, and presently, noticing her abstraction, Laura rose to her feet.

"Well, I'll be off. Peter will be in soon, I suppose."

"He won't be in till late to-night," Minnie laughed. "He's gone to see about that house he is so keen on in Chelsea! Not that we can really afford to buy it, but we can always get a mortgage, Peter says, and he thinks it would be a good investment."

Laura cast her eyes up to the ceiling.

"Oh, of course, all authors and artists go and live in Chelsea sooner or later, don't they?" she asked teasingly. "You'll have to find me a studio close by, my dear."

"Peter hates Chiswick," Minnie apologised.

She was a little dubious about this new scheme of Peter's; for once it was she who was inclined to be cautious whilst he was confident.

"It will be all right," he declared, "we've got

our foot on the ladder, or, rather, you have, and now there'll be no looking back."

She had cried out in dismay:

"Oh, Peter! I may never make another shilling as long as I live."

But he would not listen.

"I know you better than you know yourself," he declared. "If I didn't I wouldn't consider the house."

"I should like to stay with you as Peter's out," Laura said as she buttoned herself into her big coat, "but I promised Lionel to go home, he's bringing some friends. . . ." She was struck with a sudden idea. "Minnie, why not come back with me?"

Minnie hesitated, then she shook her head. "No, I won't leave the house to-night—the girl's out, and somebody might come—not that we get many visitors," she added laughingly.

She went to the door with Laura, kissed her, and watched till she was beyond the light of the street lamp and so out of sight in the darkness; then she turned to shut the front door.

But she was conscious of a curious reluctance to do so, and for some seconds she stood peering into the street, her hand on the latch. "Somebody might come. . . ." Her own words crossed her mind again with a sense of prophecy. "Somebody might come!"

Who would be likely to call at that hour? she

asked herself derisively; she was foolishly imaginative.

She shut the front door determinedly and went back to the sitting-room, but before she had settled down again by the fire there was a sharp ring at the bell. Minnie gripped the arms of the chair with both hands, and her heart began to race.

Somebody *had* come! Somebody . . . It was no doubt only Laura returned—possibly she had forgotten her gloves or umbrella; she was proverbially careless—but Minnie was throbbing with a great excitement as she went out into the hall again and drew back the latch.

There was a moment's silence, then:

"I think I knew it was you," she said painfully, as she looked into William Winter's eyes.

He explained and apologised together as he took off his coat and scarf in the narrow hall.

"I was in the neighbourhood and it seemed such an excellent opportunity to see you, so I took my chance and came along." He followed her into the firelit room.

"Well, and how are you after all this time?" he asked.

Minnie was stooping to poke the fire into a blaze. She felt very shaken, and there was a scared look in her eyes.

She was wondering that it had not been a surprise to her to open the door and find William

there; wondering why she had known that he would come to-night.

"I'm very well," she forced herself to say. She went on hammering at the fire as if her life depended on it till William quietly took the poker from her and laid it down in the fender.

"And now sit down and reply to a few questions," he said in his old bullying way. "First of all, why didn't you answer my letter?"

Minnie had obediently taken the chair he drew up for her, but she could not meet his eyes.

"Your letter? Why should I answer it? There wasn't anything to answer. . . ."

His keen eyes sought her face.

"You might have invented something," he said ruthlessly. "For instance, you might have congratulated me on my marriage."

She looked up, the blood rushing to her face in a crimson tide. "I do! Oh, you know I do, William," she said breathlessly. "I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you very much." There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "And you?" he asked. "How is the world using you?"

"Very well, thank you. Very well indeed."

"Happy?" The question seemed jerked from him.

Minnie met his eyes.

"Quite happy," she said steadily. "Peter is very good to me."

William cleared his throat.

"That's right," he said. "We both seem to have made a lucky choice. I should like you to meet my wife, Minnie. . . ."

She forced herself to answer.

"I should very much like to, William."

There was a little silence, then Minnie said with a pale smile. "She's pretty, of course?"

"Yes."

"And clever?"

He smiled at that. "No—not particularly. I don't know that I care very much for clever women."

Minnie's heart sank. It was like William to say that just when she was struggling so hard to come somewhere near what she believed to be his standard of excellence. She remembered with a pang that Peter had told her of at least a dozen of his friends who had recently congratulated him on his "clever" wife.

William was watching her closely, and after a moment he said: "You've altered, Minnie."

"Have I?"

"Yes, you've altered in the way I always knew you would alter."

"For the better, or worse?" she asked lightly.

"Anyone but myself would say for the better."

"You mean, *you* don't think so?"

"I mean that I always liked you—just as you were."

There was a softened note in his voice, and Minnie had the strange feeling that while he spoke something she had missed since the day of her marriage stole quietly into the room and was standing beside her again.

It was William who broke the silence. "Do you mind if I smoke a pipe?"

"Oh no. Peter always does."

"And where is Peter to-night? Not home yet?"

"He generally gets in at seven, but I don't expect him till late to-night. He's got some business to attend to."

"I see." There was a little pause. Then, "Well, aren't you going to invite me to stay to supper?" William demanded.

She laughed and flushed.

"I didn't think you would care about it. I've only got cold meat and bread and cheese."

"Nectar for the gods in your company," said William. "Do you remember the last meal we had together—just before you were married?"

He was busy lighting his pipe, and it seemed to occupy all his attention.

"Yes, I remember."

"And that is—how long ago?"

"Nearly two years."

"Two years and three months," he corrected her.

There was a little silence. "Much water has

gone through the mill since then," he added sententiously.

"Yes."

She picked up the poker again and made another onslaught on the fire.

William laughed.

"You'll put the fire out. Give it to me."

She handed him the poker submissively, and he laid it down as he had done before.

The clock on the chimneypiece—a wedding present from the men in Peter's office—struck seven. Minnie stood up.

"If you mean to stay to supper, I must see about getting it ready," she said. She felt that any task would be preferable to this inaction, sitting there with his eyes and the firelight upon her.

William rose also.

"Let me help," he said readily. But she would not allow that.

"I'd rather do it myself. Please stay there and smoke your pipe. Please! I'd rather you did."

"Very well."

But she paused at the door a moment on her way out to ask a last question.

"William, what have you done with—your wife?"

"I'm a grass widower for the time being. She's

holiday-making, staying with friends in Devonshire."

"Oh."

She went away then, and William heard her moving about in the kitchen and the clatter of plates and knives.

"You look quite at home," she told him when she came back to lay the cloth.

William settled his broad shoulders more comfortably into the arm-chair.

"I feel it," he said. "You've got a nice little house, Minnie."

"Yes, but we think of moving. Peter wants to buy one in Chelsea."

"Oh, of course, you're wealthy people now."

She flushed, wondering if he was laughing at her.

"I should be quite happy to stay where I am," she said defensively.

She moved round the table, placing forks and glasses in order, every now and then glancing quickly at him and away again.

He had aged very much, she thought, much more than the years warranted—his hair was plentifully touched with grey, and his face had grown thin, with rather weary looking lines about the eyes. And yet—yet he was the same William! the boy she had loved so dearly years ago. He turned his head suddenly to find her eyes upon him.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said lightly.

She laughed. "I was wondering what your's were?"

"Mine?" he sighed, and stretched out his legs. "I was thinking how differently life turns out from what we imagine it will when we are young."

She nodded soberly.

"Yes, I suppose it's all for the best, though."

She waited a moment, then vanished once more into the kitchen, and William rose, knocking the ashes from his pipe into the grate.

He had thought about Minnie very often during the past two years, and wondered if she was happy, but it was only after reading her book that the desire to see her again had grown to be almost an obsession.

And now he was here, in her house, and he was conscious of a deep and great contentment. It was as if he had come back home after a long and wearisome journey, during which the sound of her step and her voice were the dear, familiar things which he had missed and longed for.

And some lines he had once read and forgotten come into his mind as he went back to sit in Peter's comfortable arm-chair.

"Try as he may, no man breaks wholly loose
From his first love, no matter who she be."

That was true enough, anyway. He could never break loose from Minnie whatever happened.

"The feast is served," she said in the doorway, and he rose to his feet.

Minnie was a little flushed and breathless, and her hair had got untidy in the old remembered way.

"You must be host," she said, waving him to the head of the table. "Peter always carves when he's here. I simply can't, and I'm not going to apologise for the supper. You should have had something better if I'd known you were coming."

"I like taking people by surprise," William said, as he took up the carving knife. "Do you remember the night I walked in when your mother was ill?"

"Yes, and I went to the station with you, and there was a moon, and we wished!"

"Did your wish ever come true, Minnie?"

She shook her head.

"No, I never thought it would. Did yours?"

He answered with forced gaiety that it had not done so at the time of going to press, but that he had not yet given up hope.

"Do you like the knuckle end?" he enquired interestedly.

"Anything. I don't mind."

It was a strange meal, and yet to both of them it seemed quite natural to be sitting there together.

"As if we were married," Minnie thought, and looking across at William read the same thought in his eyes.

"I feel as if I ought to call you 'my dear,' and complain that the joint is underdone," he said with a queer little laugh.

"Are you a complaining husband?" she asked, flushing nervously.

William answered gravely that of course he was the ideal husband—good tempered, affectionate, unselfish . . .

Minnie interrupted impulsively. "How you must have changed!"

He frowned at her with pretended anger. "What does that mean, pray? Are you insinuating that I was selfish in the palmy days when you and I were young together?"

"I think you were—rather!" she insisted gently.

William's levity fell from him, and for a moment he looked almost unhappy.

"I'm afraid I was," he admitted, and there was a painful little silence, which Minnie broke with a desperate attempt to disperse the serious element which seemed to have crept into the conversation.

"I hope Peter will come home while you are here. I should like you to meet him."

"I should like to meet him," William answered perfunctorily.

When supper was over he helped her clear away the dishes, then drew two chairs up to the fire.

"Do you smoke?" he asked, producing some cigarettes.

"No, thank you."

He raised his dark brows.

"No? And you a famous authoress."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth to hide its quivering, then she said quietly: "Don't laugh at me, William."

"Laugh at you!"

He sat silent for a moment, staring into the fire, then he said abruptly: "I wonder if I dare tell you something?"

He waited, but she made no comment, and he went on.

"It has always been in my mind that some day I would tell you, but there has never been an opportunity—until now."

He looked at her with whimsical eyes.

"You don't appear particularly interested," he reproached her lightly.

"Oh, but I am! Please tell me."

He moved his chair a little further back so as to be out of the firelight before he spoke again.

"Do you remember that last time I came down to Walton—when I met you coming along the road with Quartus and the house was up for sale?"

"Yes."

There was a painful little silence, which Minnie broke by saying: "I've still got Quartus, he's asleep in the kitchen now, he's getting very old."

"I must see him presently."

There followed another silence, then William went on.

"I came down that afternoon to ask you to marry me, Minnie, and you told me that you were engaged to Laleham."

He did not look at her, but he was conscious of her sudden stillness, and when presently he raised his eyes he found that she was looking at him with a queer blind expression on her pale face. But when she spoke her voice was very much as usual—a little more breathless, perhaps—and she smiled as if she were sorry for him, or for herself, or perhaps for them both.

"Why do you tell me now?" she asked in a gentle, puzzled way.

And William answered: "I don't know. . . ."

Then suddenly he pushed back his chair and rose, coming closer to her and looking down at her with the old melting look in his brown eyes.

"Yes, I do know; it's because I want you to know—I want you to know that I've never cared for—for any other woman in quite the same way that I've always cared for you. You were the first, Minnie, and you'll be the last. . . . It can't

matter telling you now—it's all over, and we're both married and—and happily settled."

He stooped and took one of the motionless hands lying in her lap.

"But we can always be friends, can't we?"

"Yes."

His eyes searched her pale face wistfully.

"What are you thinking about, Minnie?"

He saw her lips tremble as she answered. "I was wondering what difference it would have made."

"What do you mean? You never cared for me, did you? No, I know you never did—not in that way, I mean. . . . You never cared for me . . . Minnie?"

She drew her hand from his with gentle deliberation.

"I think it's time you went, William," she said, with a little breathless note in her voice. "It's getting late. I think it's time you went."

Then she rose to her feet, too, and they stood looking at one another across the firelit space that divided them, across all the years that should have united them. Then William turned and went out into the hall, and she heard him getting into his coat. She stayed where she was, and presently he came back.

"Well, it's been good to see you again," he said with an effort.

"It's been good to see you too," Minnie answered.

"I'm sorry not to have met Laleham," William said. "We must arrange a meeting in town when my wife comes back from Devonshire."

"That will be nice," Minnie said stiffly. She wished he would go, her head ached, and there was a queer little throbbing pulse in her throat that hurt.

Then William said: "I suppose you couldn't come up to town to-morrow evening and have dinner with me somewhere? I shall be quite at a loose end, and——"

She drew back.

"Peter doesn't like going out once he gets home —he has long days."

"I didn't mean Peter—I meant—just—you," William said bluntly.

Minnie turned her face away. "Just—you!"

The words sent some almost forgotten pulse stirring in her heart, and her nerves shook with excitement.

Why shouldn't she go, just this once? There was no harm in it, and it was almost the first time William had ever asked her to go out with him.

Almost the first time! That thought hurt, too, as with it came the memory of the woman who filled the place in his life which after all she might have had.

She drew a long breath.

"Thank you, but I don't think I can."

He came a step nearer.

"Why not?" he urged.

She shook her head dumbly. There was no reason at all that she could give, except—Peter! And just now he seemed a pitifully inadequate reason.

William's fingers closed about her wrist.

"Do come, Minnie," he said softly. "I may not see you again for—God alone knows how long! Will you? I'll be at the Savoy at half-past six and wait till you come. We need not necessarily dine there if you would like a quieter place. Say you will come?"

She shook her head again. "I can't."

He tried to see her face, but she kept it averted.

"You mean you don't want to?"

"No, I don't mean that."

"Then, will you? Say yes, my dear," he pleaded very softly.

She turned her head slowly and looked at him with eyes that were infinitely pathetic—eyes that asked not to be hurt; eyes that pleaded with him to spare her. But William would not recognise that look. He lifted her hand to his lips and held it there for a moment, then he released her and turned away.

"I shall be there, and I shall wait till you come," he said obstinately.

She watched him go out of the room, she listened to his steps in the passage, and the opening and closing of the front door, then she heard his steps on the pavement outside as he passed the window and the house; then they died away, and a great silence seemed to fall on the world.

Chapter XI

SHE wanted to go! With all her heart and soul she wanted to go!

During the night that was the only thought in Minnie's mind as she lay staring into the darkness through long, wakeful hours listening to Peter Laleham's deep, regular breathing and seeing only William's eyes as they had pleaded with her.

What harm would it be—just for this once? She had known him all her life and they were both married.

Then, unbidden, the thought crept into her mind that if things had been different it would have been William lying here beside her instead of Peter—William whom she had known all her life, and loved all her life; William whom, as she now knew, had loved her too! *Had* loved her? *Still* loved her perhaps, for why should he have changed when she had not?

And as if sensing the turmoil in her heart, Peter stirred and flung a protecting arm around his wife's slim body as if to shield her against even the breath of danger that threatened. And Minnie's face burned in the darkness, and she closed her eyes with a sick feeling of shame. What had come to her that she could be so dis-

loyal, even if it was only in thought? She was glad she had told William she could not go with him, glad she had not let him guess the answering flame which had sprang into being at his touch. She remembered that she was Peter's wife, and she told herself that she loved Peter, but the weight of his arm above her beating heart was a burden, and she clenched her hands beside her in the effort not to turn away from him.

And the old childish prayer which she still said beside her bed every night, though with the years it had grown to be almost a meaningless parrot jumble, rose now to her lips as she lay there afraid.

"God bless my father, and mother, and Aunt Louise, and dear Peter, and all kind friends, and make me a good girl, and God bless William the Third and make him a good man, for Christ's sake. Amen."

It was unconsciously that she used the old petitioning words; unconsciously that she prayed for her father and mother and Aunt Louise, who were all dead; for herself as a girl, whose girlhood was left behind, and for William, who had long since given up trying to be a good man. But the prayer comforted her, and presently the feverish unrest in her soul died away and she lay peacefully asleep beneath the protection of Peter's strong arm.

But in the morning the battle began again, for

at breakfast time Peter said: "By the way, I forgot to tell you last night I've got to go up to Norwich on business, and I'm afraid it means staying the night."

He looked at his wife ruefully, for if there was one thing which Peter disliked it was sleeping away from home.

But he was surprised at the look of distress which crossed her face and the protest in her voice.

"Oh, Peter, *must* you?"

He laughed, well pleased.

"I'll get back if I can, you may be sure," he said. "But I'm afraid there's not much hope. After all, business comes first, eh, little woman?"

"Of course."

She packed a handbag for him and tried not to think of the evening. She would *not* go to meet William whatever happened; she had no intention of going, and yet, when Peter had gone to the office and the duties of the little house had been done, Minnie stole up to her room guiltily, for fear the little maid should see and know the thought in her heart, and took her new evening frock from the wardrobe. It was only the second she had had since her marriage, and it had not yet been worn, and her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright as she laid it on the bed.

She had chosen blue because, although she had not realised it until now, William had liked blue

in their childhood's days. Almost the only time he had ever told her she looked nice had been when she was wearing a blue cotton frock. She wondered if he would remember when he saw her to-night—if he—then she pulled her thoughts up in sudden panic, for, of course, she was not going to-night, nothing would ever induce her to go. She put the frock away after lunch and took Quartus out for a long walk, not coming back until five o'clock.

She heard the hour strike as she entered the house, and into her mind the thought came like a lightning flash, "I shall just have time to get there." And she found she was trembling and that her cheeks were hot, and she sat down on the bottom stair and shut her eyes tightly. "Peter would hate it if he knew," she told herself.

But there would be no need for Peter to know as he was not coming home to-night.

And William would be there waiting, with the soft, melting look in his eyes. He had said that he would wait till she came. . . .

Minnie went upstairs and dressed.

She felt as if she were in a dream—her pulses were throbbing, and her heart seemed to be beating somewhere up in her throat, choking her. Her hands shook, hampering her movements, but she was ready at last, and stood for a breathless moment in front of the glass.

To her critical eyes she had never looked so

plain; but the little wave of disappointment passed quickly as she recalled William's words, "I mean that I always liked you—just as you were."

She took up her wrap and slipped it on, her thoughts racing ahead as one's thoughts race from the early pages of a book to the last. What would he say to her? How would he look? Did he still love her? She felt that she would give her soul to know—and perhaps to-night he would tell her.

"I'm a wicked woman," she thought tremblingly. "I'm not good enough for Peter—he would never love anyone but me."

But she took up her gloves and went downstairs just as Peter Laleham opened the front door with his latchkey and entered the house.

"I'm not going after all," he announced cheerfully. Then he saw his wife's frock and his eyes widened. "Where on earth are you going?" he demanded blankly.

Minnie stood on the last stair, her hand clutching at the baluster. She looked very cold and pale, but after a moment she managed to smile.

"I'm not going anywhere; I only wanted to try on my new frock—to see how I looked." Her smile wavered. "Do you like me in it?" she appealed.

Peter was a simple soul in many ways, and believed in his wife more than he believed in God.

He crossed the narrow hall to where she stood and put his arms round her, his handsome face flushing. "You're the loveliest thing in the world," he said, and honestly meant it.

Chapter XII

MINNIE was brushing old Quartus in the small front garden the following morning when the gate opened and William walked in.

She was on her knees in the autumn sunshine, the sleeves of her frock rolled up to the elbows, and for a moment she stared up at him with paling cheeks before she rose to her feet.

"William! How you startled me!"

"I'm sorry." His eyes accused her as he said, "I waited two hours for you last night."

"I told you I could not come."

"You could have done it if you had wished to."

"I suppose I did *not* wish to, then," Minnie said defensively.

There was a short silence, then William spoke again. "Well, I suppose I can come in—or mustn't I?"

"Of course you can, but I am just going out to do the shopping."

"I'll come with you," William said promptly. "I'm a dabster at carrying baskets and parcels."

"Very well."

She followed him into the sitting-room, rolling down her sleeves with nervous fingers.

"I'll put my hat on, if you don't mind waiting."

He looked at her steadily.

"Must I again remind you that I waited two hours for you uncomplainingly last night?" he protested.

Minnie went upstairs without answering. She felt afraid and a little angry. Why had he come when she had tried to show him so plainly that she meant their friendship to cease.

But had she tried? She thought of last night, and her cheeks burned as she realised that but for Peter she would have gone to town. She took as long as she could over dressing, but when at last she went downstairs she found William in the arm-chair unconcernedly reading the paper. He looked up when she entered and rose. "Ready?"

"Yes." She hardly knew whether to laugh or cry at the way in which he took it for granted that she desired his company. At the door she turned and faced him desperately. "Haven't you anything better to do than come and watch me buy butter and bacon?" she demanded.

"Nothing," said William promptly. "Until to-night there is not a soul on earth who can find use for my company unless you can."

She laughed at that and took courage. He seemed so matter of fact and friendly once again.

They walked on down the road together, with old Quartus ambling behind them.

"What did Laleham say when you told him I had called?" William asked presently.

Minnie flushed.

"I didn't tell him," she said, and realised it for the first time. She felt William's eyes upon her.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I forgot all about it."

It was not the truth, but he let it pass.

They were at the shops now, and Minnie deliberately made as many purchases as possible, maliciously giving William all the parcels to carry.

"You would come," she reminded him when he began to look rueful.

He held out his laden hands. "I can still manage one more," he told her.

"Then we must buy something for lunch," Minnie said gaily. "That is, supposing you are going to stay to lunch."

"No, you're lunching out with me to-day," he answered. "You owe it to me as a reward for last night. We'll just take these parcels home and run up to town."

Minnie began to refuse.

"I can't! I've heaps of things to do."

"Nonsense! They can wait and I can't!"

"I've a chapter of my new book to finish."

"You can do it afterwards."

She began to refuse again.

"I can't——" Then she met his eyes. "Oh,

very well!" she said, suddenly submissive. "But you'll have to wait while I change my frock."

"I seem to be doomed to spend most of my life waiting for you," William grumbled. "What's the matter with the frock you're wearing?"

"It's old and shabby."

"Nonsense! It's good enough for me."

"You've changed, then," she flashed back at him. "I can remember once being cut to the soul because you told me my frock was dirty! Oh, it's years and years ago," she hastened to add, as he would have spoken, "but I was hurt all the same."

"I must have been an unspeakable cad," William said disgustedly.

"No," Minnie answered thoughtfully. "It was just—you!" There was a softened note of memory in her voice, and realising it she hurried on as if anxious to hide it. "That's all my shopping. We can go home now."

They walked back to the house almost without speaking.

"You must amuse yourself while I change," Minnie informed him. "There's a newspaper and some books in the dining-room."

She left him and went up to her room, humming a little snatch of song and feeling very light hearted. She took out her best hat and thought how dowdy it was. She had been meaning to

buy a new one for some time. She remembered that William liked a woman to be smart.

"I shall never be that," she told herself, sighing as she brushed her hair and hurriedly changed her frock. She was still singing softly as she went downstairs to find William looking critically at a photograph of Peter which stood on the mantelshelf. He turned round as she entered.

"That hat makes you look five years younger," he said abruptly.

Minnie laughed.

"Does it? You know, I always do feel young somehow when I'm with you," she answered unthinkingly, then flushed and hastened to change the subject. "That's Peter," she said, indicating the photograph he held.

"So I imagined."

Minnie took it from him and put it back on the mantelshelf.

"He's the handsomest man I've ever seen," she said, with a breath of defiance.

"Is he?"

"Yes." She began to button her gloves. "I'll just tell Elizabeth I shan't be in to lunch, then I'm ready."

They walked to the end of the road, and William hailed a taxi.

"But the station's quite near," Minnie objected.

"I know, but I hate trains. We'll go by taxi."

"What? All the way?" she gasped, dismayed.

"Why, what extravagance! Peter would think we were mad."

"Peter need not know any more than he knew that I called yesterday," William said maliciously.

Minnie raised her chin. "Of course I shall tell him," she answered.

"Oh, of course," William agreed calmly.

He followed her into the taxi and slammed the door.

"We're going to lunch in a quiet little place I discovered on my honeymoon," he announced.

Minnie shrank back a little. She felt suddenly cold, as if a breath of icy wind had touched her, and once again she had the queer vision of William with a stranger woman looking over his shoulder.

"You must meet my wife, you'll like her," William went on. He waited a moment, during which Minnie tried to speak, but her lips felt stiff and her throat dry.

William turned and looked at her with a queer expression in his eyes.

"Don't you want to meet her?" he demanded gruffly.

Minnie found her voice.

"Of course—I——" Every word was an effort, and as if realising it William cut her brutally short. "You don't and I don't want you to. Let's be honest with one another, Minnie."

His hand fell to hers, imprisoning it almost

violently. "Let's be honest with one another," he said again, "or, at any rate, let me be honest with you. . . . My marriage was a mistake. . . . I wouldn't admit to to anyone else, but it was a mistake. . . . I didn't care for her. Perhaps you won't believe it, but I have never wanted to marry any woman but you. . . ."

Minnie sat staring before her. She felt as if she were in a dream, listening to unreal answers to very real questions which had so often in imagination tortured her. And William said again: "You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife, and I couldn't have you."

In her heart Minnie said, "You *could* have had me . . ." but she bit her lip and sat silent, her hand shaking beneath his touch, and he went on as if some ruthless storm had broken down his usual stoicism and self-control.

"After I knew you were to be married life seemed to change completely. Nothing seemed to matter any more. I just didn't care? It took me some time to realise what was the cause, then I knew! It was because you were out of my reach, and because I had lost you that I lost my ambition as well. You always predicted great things for me, Minnie; well, I shall disappoint you. I shall never do anything worth while now, nothing you'll ever be proud of. It's a confession of weakness, I suppose, and you'll despise me for it, but there it is. . . ."

She made a little shivering movement of protest. "Don't talk like that. It's wrong. You're not a weakling."

"I think I am now. I've lost my energy. It's just that things are too much trouble. I'm drifting, and I can't stop myself—perhaps because I don't want to."

"You could if you chose to."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"Then I suppose I don't choose. I've got enough money to live on. I'm not rich, and don't want to be, but I've got enough. The guv'nor left me some when he died."

Minnie gave a soft little cry. "Oh, is your father dead?"

"He died seven months ago. I nearly wrote to you then, but it seemed no use—you would not have remembered him."

"I remember him perfectly," she answered. "I remember him in the rain—that last morning years ago before I went home with Aunt Louise."

William gave a little tender laugh of reminiscence. "When you were so frightened that you ran off without saying good-bye to me."

"You were just as frightened as I was," Minnie reminded him.

There was a little silence, which she broke by asking: "And—your wife?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She has an income of her own. She is quite happy. I'm decent enough to her."

"I didn't mean that—I meant . . . what does she think about you? Doesn't she want you to go on working? Doesn't she want you to do great things?"

"If she does, she has never said so."

Minnie's face quivered. She had never before seen William in a mood of such cynical indifference, and it hurt her unspeakably, even while she felt that it was the effect rather than the cause which made the tragedy.

She had dreamed such dreams of his future, had placed him so high amongst the great, and now she was to be bitterly disappointed. She cast vainly about in her mind for words with which to help and comfort him, but the only ones she could find seemed so pitifully inadequate.

And then the taxi stopped and William let her hand go. "This is the place I spoke of," he said. His voice was quite calm again, but his eyes were not, and Minnie's heart was beating up in her throat as she followed him into the restaurant.

It was small and unpretentious, but scrupulously clean and quiet, and besides themselves there were only two middle-aged men dining in the long narrow room.

Minnie sat down at a table William indicated and drew off her gloves. The dreamlike feeling was still upon her, and her face felt feverish.

The walls all around were hung with mirrors, and in one of them she caught a glimpse of her reflection, of her scared, wistful eyes, and quivering mouth; and suddenly she realised that she was trembling from head to foot, and afraid—though of what she could not have explained.

Then William came and sat down beside her, and she heard him ask what she would like to eat, and she heard her own voice answer that it did not matter, that she was not hungry, and then the waiter came and William ordered, and the waiter went away and they were left alone again. And with his eyes upon her William said suddenly:

"Minnie, you're not afraid of me?"

And she forced herself to smile and shake her head and answer, "Why, of course not." And she was not, it was only of herself that she was afraid, terribly afraid, and of the longing to slip a hand into his, and tell him that it was all right, and that she had always loved him and always would.

And then, with a little gasp, she remembered Peter, whom she always seemed so easily to forget when she was with William, and she tried hard to keep his face before her and to remember her loyalty to him, but it seemed difficult, so difficult, and she was almost giving up the fight when someone spoke her name, and she looked up into Laura Sylvester's amazed face.

"Minnie! You here? Lionel and I have always congratulated ourselves that this is a place where we never meet anyone we know. How did you find it?"

Minnie rose to her feet. She did not know whether she was glad or sorry at the encounter.

"I didn't find it," she said helplessly, "I—— May I introduce Mr. Winter?—Miss Sylvester."

And immediately William became William as she had always known him, and the strange, unhappy man who had held her hand a moment ago was gone.

"Shall I be *de trop* if I lunch with you?" Laura asked lightly. Her quick eyes had seen the strong agitation in Minnie's face, and a defensive desire to protect rose in her heart. Who was this man with the fast greying hair and determined face who had the power to bring such a look to Minnie's eyes? She was conscious of a most unusual interest in him; as a rule she did not care for men, but now she exerted herself to be interesting and amusing.

"I don't think you and I have ever met before," William said, and she shook her head.

"No, and I've never even heard of you," she told him frankly.

"That is not very complimentary to me," William protested. "Minnie and I have known one another ever since we were small enough to enjoy fishing for crabs from the same breakwater."

"But you were the only one who ever caught any," Minnie reminded him. She was making a great effort to recover herself and to behave naturally, and now, when she looked at William, the dream feeling had gone, and it seemed impossible that he had ever really said that he loved her.

Laura looked from one to the other, her dark brows raised in surprise.

"You've known one another all those years! Minnie, why haven't you ever spoken to me of Mr. Winter?"

Minnie laughed.

"I suppose because it never occurred to me. I haven't seen him for so long, you see—not once since I was married, and I've never seen his wife," she added deliberately.

William met the challenge in her eyes calmly.

"No, we must arrange a meeting," he said. "My wife will be in town this week. What do you say Minnie? You and your husband must dine with us one night."

"We shall be very pleased," Minnie said in a hard little voice, and she wondered what William and Peter would think of one another.

When she could find an unobserved opportunity she caught Laura's hand under cover of the cloth.

"Don't go," she whispered.

Laura nodded almost imperceptibly. William

interested her, and she was longing to know what the position was between him and Minnie.

"And do you live in London, Miss Sylvester?" William asked, and she nodded and smiled.

"Yes, we've got a queer little place over a discarded mews off Baker Street. Minnie loves it, don't you, Minnie? You go through a cobble-stoned yard to reach it, and up a narrow staircase. But it's all right when you get there. You must come and have tea with me, Mr. Winter."

"I shall be delighted," William said perfunctorily. He looked at Minnie. "Which day will you take me?" he asked.

Minnie laughed.

"I think you are quite capable of taking yourself," she told him. "Besides, two is company, you know."

"We shall be four with Lionel," Laura said quickly. "I live with my brother," she explained to William.

She glanced at her wrist-watch. "Well, I must be going. . . ."

Minnie rose hurriedly. "So must I, so we will go together." She looked at William, and her lips quivered into a smile. "Thank you so much for my nice lunch," she said.

William's face was rather grim.

"Am I to be sent about my business, then?" he asked.

She made no answer, and he said again, lowering his voice so that Laura could not hear.

"I thought you were not afraid of me?"

A vivid flush dyed Minnie's pale cheeks, and she turned away without answering.

She felt as if the world had suddenly gone mad —in the last few hours life seemed to have changed utterly. If before to-day she had not been perfectly happy, at least she had been peacefully contented; but now she knew to her cost that she had lost even her peace of mind since the moment when William told her that he had always loved her.

He said good-bye to them outside the restaurant and saw them into a taxi.

"I shall fix up that appointment for dinner," were his last words to Minnie. "You might ask Laleham which night will suit him and let me know."

"Yes," said Minnie, but she knew that she would do no such thing.

"What a very charming man," Laura said as they drove away; "and have you really known him all those years?"

"Yes. I think I was about nine when we first met."

"You really must bring him to tea," Laura urged again after a moment. "What a pity he's married," she added jokingly. "There might have been a chance for me."

She was not serious, but Minnie's heart contracted jealously; even in fun it hurt her to hear William appropriated by another woman.

She answered Laura's many questions vaguely with the feeling that she was moving and speaking in a dream, but all the while William's voice when he said "You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife" was ringing in her ears, and her hand still seemed to throb from the hard grip of his fingers.

Laura roused her from her dreaming.

"If you really are going to have dinner with Mr. Winter and his wife one evening you might be a sport and ask us, Minnie. Lionel hates dining out as a rule, but he'll go if you and Peter do."

"Of course we'll ask you," Minnie promised. But she did not mean to. She did not mean to see William again if she could possibly avoid it.

But she told Peter about him when he came home that night.

A dozen times during the evening she tried to force herself to speak of his visit, and a dozen times her courage failed, till just as Peter was yawning and talking about bed the words came with a rush, "Oh, Peter, I never told you. I had a visitor to-day."

"Oh!" Peter yawned again. "Who—Laura?" he asked.

Minnie managed a nervous little laugh.

"No; someone much more interesting. Mr. Winter."

Peter sat up, brushing his hair the wrong way with a tired hand.

"Winter? Who is he? Never heard of him."

"He's a man I knew—years ago. A man I've known all my life—only I haven't seen him for—for—oh, years!"

"Never heard of him," said Peter again.

Minnie's nervous little laugh came once more.

"Well, he wants us to have dinner with him one night, and his wife! Laura and Lionel will come, too, if you will."

"Laura and Lionel! How on earth do they know him?"

Minnie explained as well as she could. "We all had lunch together to-day—at least, Laura and William and I did."

He caught her up sharply.

"William! Do you call him by his Christian name, then?"

"I've known him since I was about nine," she apologised.

"Humph! Well, I don't want to dine with the fellow; he's of no interest to me." Peter rose to his feet. "Come to bed. "I'm dog tired."

She dared say no more—and yet, why not? What harm was there in speaking about William, she asked herself with a sense of desolation. There was no harm. There never would be, and

yet she lay awake through the long hours unable to sleep, her mind filled with the tenderness of William's voice when he said, "You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife."

Too late he had told her! Many years too late! And now she would have to go on for the rest of her life with this new fierce pain and longing in her heart.

She checked that thought in a panic. Whither was she allowing herself to drift? How could any man possibly influence or change her life if she would not allow him to do so?

She was safely and happily married, and William could never be anything to her! But even while she argued with herself she knew the futility of the argument—for was not William everything to her, and had he not always been?

And a sudden trembling seized her and a great sense of loneliness, so that she groped through the darkness like a frightened child and found Peter's hand—a hand which closed about hers immediately with swift reassurance.

"Why, you're as cold as ice," Peter said drowsily, and drew her close to him, falling asleep again at once.

But Minnie lay awake for hours with the tears wet on her cheeks—tears for herself, and tears for Peter who loved her, and most bitter tears of all for what might have been.

Chapter XIII

TWO mornings later there was a letter in William's handwriting lying on the breakfast table when Minnie came downstairs.

She caught it up in a panic, her first instinct to hide it from Peter; then she recovered herself scornfully. Why, how absurd! What could William possibly write to her about that Peter might not see?

But her pulses were jerking uneasily as she opened the letter and read the few formal lines.

"DEAR MINNIE,

"It was good to see you again the other day and renew our old friendship. My wife is now with me in town, where we have decided to remain for a few days longer, and she joins me in hoping that you and your husband will have dinner with us one evening. Is Saturday night convenient? If so, drop me a line and meet us at the Savoy at seven o'clock.

"Kindest regards from us both.

"Yours sincerely,

"WILLIAM WINTER."

Peter came into the room at that moment, and Minnie passed the letter to him.

"From William. I told you he wanted to meet you."

Peter scanned the letter and growled.

"Why Saturday night?" he complained. "I dislike going out on a Saturday night."

"We need not go," Minnie said quietly. "I'll write and refuse if you don't want to go."

"The fellow's of no interest to me," Peter complained, "and, anyway, I object to him calling you by your Christian name."

Minnie laughed outright.

"Oh, how absurd! when we were children together."

Peter took up the newspaper.

"Well, I don't want to meet him, anyway."

"Very well."

No more was said, but, conscious of her silence, Peter looked at his wife furtively from time to time from behind his paper.

She looked different somehow, he thought in his unsuspecting way, and wondered if she was disappointed at his refusal to meet her friends.

He would not have believed it had he been told that the little cold look on Minnie's face was born of the formality of William's letter, when she had almost hoped—half expected—"You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife."

Of course, he had never really said that! They were just words of her own vain imagining; or if he had said them, they had not been meant! How could he love her? Why should he love her?

She had never lost her first childish awe and

adoration of William. She still thought of him as someone far above her and entirely wonderful; her love placed him on an undeserved pedestal and shut its eyes to his feet of clay.

Peter broke in upon her thoughts abruptly.

"We'll go if you want to, Minnie."

He was faintly amazed at the sudden rush of colour to her face and the swift gratitude in her eyes. "Oh, thank you, Peter," she said rather breathlessly.

So they went, though when it came to the point Peter grumbled at having to get into a dinner jacket, and grumbled at having to go at all.

"Why people can't be satisfied to stay in their own home when they've got one, I'm blessed if I can see," he protested. "Wasting money, I call it."

But he relented when they got outside the house and rose to the extravagance of a taxicab.

"We may as well show them that we know how to do things," he said boyishly. "What's the chap like, by the way?"

Minnie caught her breath.

"Oh, he's very clever!" she said fervently.

Peter grunted.

"Then we certainly shan't hit it," he said with emphasis. "I hate swank."

"William doesn't swank," Minnie said quickly, then stopped, horrified to feel that she should so passionately wish to defend William against

Peter's criticism. As recompense she slipped a soft little hand into his, and with that action came the swift memory of how William had held her hand on that drive to London.

"You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife!"

If only he had never said it, or if only she could forget it! Her thoughts were in an unhappy whirl.

If only she had refused to come to-night! If only even now something would happen to prevent this meeting.

"Here we are," Peter said, and opened the door. Minnie followed him slowly; her limbs were stiff and her lips cold. She was thinking of the moment when she would see the woman who was William's wife; the moment when she would have to smile and take her hand.

"And I look my plainest, I know I do," she thought in despair, "and she'll be ever so pretty." Then she looked at Peter, tall and handsome and serenely indifferent to the coming meeting, and her heart warmed again. At any rate, Peter was good to look at! As they walked through the lounge it gave her a thrill of pride to see that every woman's eyes were directed towards him.

And then she saw William, and back came the dreadful sense of breathless dread and isolation. But she managed to smile and greet him calmly before she introduced Peter. The two men shook

hands and eyed one another with faint suspicion, then William said:

"I've engaged a table; my wife will meet us there." He looked at Minnie. "You will like to leave your wrap." She seized upon the opportunity to get away for a moment, and in the shelter of the cloak-room she tried desperately to control her shaking nerves and steady herself.

"You fool! Oh, you poor silly little fool!" she said fiercely to her pale reflection. "What has happened to you? Why can't you be sensible?"

When she rejoined them Peter and William were talking and laughing, apparently on the best of terms, and they all went into the dining-room together.

"That is our table—in the corner. I thought it would be quieter," William said, and Minnie's eyes went straight to it and to the woman who sat there.

She was young and beautifully dressed; that was Minnie's first thought. Then that she was charmingly pretty; then that she had the hardest eyes she had ever met. William introduced them.

"Minnie, this is—my wife."

"Yes." Minnie uttered the little monosyllable unconsciously. She was thinking that William's voice sounded quite differently when he spoke the words "my wife," meaning this woman, to what it had done when he spoke them that day in the taxi—of her!

Mrs. Winter rose to her feet with outstretched hand.

"I have heard so much of you from Bill," she said. "I am so pleased to meet you."

But the words were perfunctory, and her hard, beautiful eyes at once went past Minnie to where handsome Peter stood, smiling with faint boredom.

Then they all sat down, and the first awkwardness passed.

William kept most of the conversation in his own hands. He could talk well and interestingly when he chose, and he soon found out that Peter's chief interests lay in the money market and amongst commercial matters.

Minnie was very silent; she hardly spoke unless she was spoken to; she hardly ate anything.

Again and again her eyes sought the charming face of William's wife. Yes, she could well understand why he had chosen her; she must always be pretty to look at, always perfectly self-assured and at her ease.

Minnie was sure that even as a girl she had never been shy or awkward, and her own face grew hot as she suddenly thought of the terrible Saturday afternoon in her mother's drawing-room when she had been forced to recite in front of William and the boy Tankerton.

"Our phantom voices haunt the air
As we were still at play.
And I can hear them call and say,
'How far is it to Babylon?'
Ah, far enough, my dear,
Far, far enough from here.
Yet you have farther gone!

'Can I get there by candlelight?'
So goes the old refrain.
I do not know—perchance you might—
But only children hear it right,
Ah! never to return again!
The eternal dawn, beyond a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And put all stars and candles out
Ere we be young again."

She woke from her reverie to find William's eyes upon her with their old melting look, and quite suddenly the tears rose to her own.

Oh, foolish, foolish! She blinked them away, terrified lest they should be seen by Peter, but he was engrossed in something William's wife was saying and was not observing her.

"My husband and your wife were sweethearts in their youthful days, I believe," William's wife was saying in her sweet, rather high-pitched voice. "I think we ought to make a few enquiries into the matter, don't you, Mr. Laleham?"

Peter laughed.

"I think we might let them off," he said lightly. "Minnie tells me that she was only nine years old when they used to fish for crabs together."

"We were at a most impressionable age," William said with pretended gravity. "One of my clearest and most vivid recollections is still of the morning we parted. It was raining, I remember, and I know I felt like suicide——"

Minnie flushed scarlet. It hurt her to hear William making fun of things which to her were a tender memory, but she managed to laugh.

"If you are going to start reminiscences I can add a few about you," she said threateningly. "To start with, you were a horrid, priggish little boy. I can remember quite well how scornful you were because I tried to recite a nursery rhyme in French without knowing the translation."

William laughed.

"I remember! It was 'Little Boy Blue,' '*Petit gars bleu, à ton cor sans delai . . .*'"

Mrs. Winter made a little grimace.

"Now you've given William the opportunity he was longing for, Mrs. Laleham," she said dryly. "He loves to air his French." She looked at Peter. "A clever husband has distinct disadvantages," she told him.

"I am beginning to find that with a clever wife," Peter said jokingly. "My wife is begin-

ning to give herself intolerable airs now she is famous," he added, smiling at Minnie.

"Peter! you know that's not true," she objected.

"I think you're perfectly wonderful," Mrs. Winter said rather effusively. "I love your book, 'The End of the Day.' It reads just as if it really happened. I suppose it's not a true story, is it?"

Minnie shook her head.

"Oh no! I just imagined it."

Mrs. Winter leaned her chin on her folded hands.

"I suppose you didn't take the hero from my Bill, did you?" she asked interestedly. "Your man Carnegie reminded me of him in so many ways."

The treacherous colour flew to Minnie's face. "Oh no! I should never dare put anyone real into a book."

William laughed.

"You may use me as often as you like, provided I get a fee every time," he said flippantly. "By the way, you were speaking of a house in Chelsea—"—he turned to Peter—"did you complete the deal?" he asked.

Peter shook his head.

"They asked too much, and anyway the house was really too large for us. I shall have a look

down in Surrey when the weather improves. Where do you live?"

"At the present moment we don't live anywhere," William answered rather dryly. "My wife is not fond of domestic worries, so we wander about."

"Well, and why not?" Mrs. Winter demanded with a trace of annoyance in her pretty voice. "We have nothing to tie us, you see," she explained to Minnie. "And whatever he chooses to say, Bill is no more anxious to settle down than I am. He was a wanderer when I first met him, and my opinion is that he always will be." She laughed. "I can't see him catching the 8.5 train to the City every morning and the 6.10 home at night! I always tell him his ancestors must have been Romanies and that he gets his restlessness from them. You would not believe me if I told you how many hotels we've lived in since we were married."

"It is my greatest ambition to travel," Minnie said rather wistfully. "I've never been out of England."

"There's plenty of time, my dear," Peter said rather abruptly. He had noticed how often William's eyes were turned to Minnie and he was beginning to resent it.

"We might manage a holiday abroad together some time, perhaps," William suggested.

"I believe in seeing one's own country first," Peter said shortly.

" 'What does he know of England, who only England knows?' " William quoted dryly.

"Personally I quite agree with Mr. Laleham," Mrs. Winter said cheerily, "and I've seen a great deal of the Continent. But I think there is no place like England. I am Devonshire born, you see."

She turned to Minnie. "Don't you love Devonshire?" she asked enthusiastically.

Minnie had to admit that she had never been there. "It's one of the many treats in store for us, isn't it, Peter?" she added, with a nervous little smile at her husband. "We've made up our minds to have a really long holiday this summer," she explained to Mrs. Winter.

"*You* have!" Peter said rather disagreeably. "I'm not sure if I shall be able to leave business for more than a week or ten days."

Minnie's cheeks flew flags of distress. It was not like Peter to be surly, especially in the presence of others. He had promised her to take six weeks' holiday at least. She did not understand that something of her own tension had communicated itself to him, and that without any actual reason or cause he was feeling passionately jealous of the man who had known Minnie when she was only a child and who could still remember his boyish pain at their first parting.

When dinner was ended they went into the lounge for coffee.

"There's dancing downstairs," Mrs. Winter said. She looked at Peter. "Do you dance?" she asked.

"I used to, but these new-fangled dances are beyond me," he told her.

She held out a friendly hand.

"Nonsense! I'll show you! We'll leave these two to talk about their crab-catching days."

And she drew the reluctant Peter away.

Minnie half rose from her chair.

"Shall we go too? I can't dance, but we can look on."

"Thanks. I'd rather stay here."

She sat back resignedly.

"You know," she said after a moment, "it is only just beginning to come home to me how very little I know about life and what a very little I've ever done!"

She looked at William with a tremulous ghost of a smile. "I can't dance or sing or play the piano or do anything that most girls do."

William's eyes twinkled wickedly.

"What about the recitations?" he said.

She flushed sensitively.

"How horrid of you! Those are some of the dreadful moments in my life which I am trying to forget."

"They are some of the precious memories of

my life which I shall always remember," William answered, suddenly grave. He leaned forward, staring down at the floor. "Do you remember that Saturday afternoon when Tankerton and I cycled down to Walton?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"I remember it as clearly as if it was yesterday," he told her. "I can see the yellow gates of your father's house and you running out in your dirty little frock; yes, it *was* dirty in spite of your indignation," he said in quick parenthesis as she made a movement of protest.

"You hurt my feelings over that—horribly!" Minnie said, trying to laugh.

There was a little pause, then William went on reminiscently, "I can see the drawing-room as distinctly as if I'd been there to-day. It had a very high ceiling and a painted cornice, and there were French windows, and a copy of that picture 'The Sea hath its Pearls' hanging over the mantelshelf." He turned and looked at Minnie sitting pale and silent beside him. "The girl in that picture always reminds me of you—something in her figure, the way she is stooping."

He stopped abruptly and for a moment seemed to forget her, then he went on:

"It rained that afternoon, do you remember? I can hear the sound of the rain still, and the sound of your poor little voice struggling through that poem of Stevenson's."

"Oh, wasn't it—awful?" Minnie whispered. There was an unkind little lump in her throat, and she kept her lids carefully lowered to hide the tears that had risen in her eyes.

Then William said suddenly:

"Minnie, will you answer me one question?"

She bit her lip to steady herself before she spoke.

"It all depends what it is."

"It's this. If I—if I'd asked you to marry me before—before Laleham came—what would you have said?"

Minnie's hands were gripping the arms of her chair, and she was white to the lips. It was some moments before she could force herself to speak.

"It's so long ago—how can I remember? Why do you ask such foolish questions?"

"You mean that you will not answer. Well, there is no need for you to do so if you will just look at me—once!"

"Look at you!" She echoed his words in a broken whisper, while in her heart she was fighting the desire to obey, fighting it with all her strength. "I will *not!* I will not!"

But even while she clung to the determination she turned her head against the cushioned chair-back and met his eyes.

And so for a moment they looked at one another silently; looked back across all the years that were gone, to the bright sunshine of a July

afternoon, and to a first innocent kiss given and received by childish lips.

It was from that moment that Minnie had first loved him, as she loved him still, as she always would love him to the end of her life.

With all his faults, all his selfishness, just as he was, he was the one man for her, and as he looked into her eyes, that were misty with unshed tears, William knew it, and would have given his soul not to know it. For the knowledge but added to his own sense of loss and despair and longing, and his hand fell passionately to hers as it gripped the chair-arm, and he broke out wildly, hardly knowing what he said:

"Oh, my beloved! Oh, my beloved!"

Minnie caught her breath sharply as if he had hurt her, and at that moment William's wife spoke behind them. "We've come back. It was so hot and crowded dancing. Heavens! how solemn you both look, don't they, Mr. Laleham?"

"I expect my wife is tired," Peter said stiffly. "I think we must be getting home."

Minnie was only too glad to go. The strain of the evening had told on her severely; she avoided saying good-bye to William, and it was only when she and Peter were out in the cool night air again that she felt she could breathe.

She was too occupied with her own agitation to notice her husband's silence, and they hardly spoke till they reached home.

"I'll go straight to bed, I'm very tired," Minnie said.

"Very well."

Peter locked up and took off his shoes at the foot of the stairs, then he followed his wife to their room.

She was standing by the dressing-table brushing her hair. She had taken off her frock, and she looked very young and girlish with her slim bare arms and white neck, and she kept her face carefully averted as Peter entered.

Then he shut the door with a little slam and spoke.

"And now perhaps you'll kindly tell me what there has been, or is, between you and that fellow."

Minnie lifted her eyes slowly, first to her own white reflection in the mirror, and then beyond it to Peter's towering above her. And she saw the jealousy and pain behind the anger in his eyes, and she remembered afresh that even as she loved William so Peter loved her.

He looked so young, almost a boy still, in spite of his height and manliness, that a wave of love that was purely maternal rose in her heart, and she knew that come what might, no matter how long she lived, she could never do anything that by word or look could hurt or injure him.

And she turned round, her hair falling about her shoulders as she smiled up into his face.

"Why, Peter! what are you talking about?"

He held her off, his hands on her bare arms, when she would have touched him.

"You know quite well what I'm talking about. That fellow—Winter—he's in love with you."

"Peter!"

Peter laughed gruffly.

"Do you think I'm a fool that I can't see?" he demanded unhappily. "The damned fellow hardly took his eyes off you the whole evening."

"Peter, I've known him all my life. We're almost like brother and sister."

"Brother and sister be damned!" he scoffed. "Then why have you never mentioned him to me before? I never heard his name till three days ago. Brother and sister! No man ever looks at his sister as that man looked at you."

"Oh, Peter, how silly!" She forced a reproachful smile to her lips, she evaded the arms that would still have warded her off, and put her own round his neck. "You're jealous, you foolish boy."

Peter jerked his head back offendedly out of her reach. "And supposing I am——"

She reached up and kissed his chin.

"You've no need to be! None!" she said, trembling.

He caught her to him.

"Minnie, you do love me? There's nobody else?"

"Peter, how can you ask me such a question?"

He bent and kissed her soft neck many times.

"I've been a fool, I know, but somehow there was quite a different look about you when you were talking to him. You looked younger—happier. I felt out of it, as if you didn't belong to me any more."

"I thought you would like him. I wanted you to be friends."

"Friends! Ugh!" Peter kissed her again and released her. He looked rather ashamed of his outburst. He took up one of his wife's brushes and began a wild onslaught upon his hair.

"I'm afraid he's not the sort of chap I could ever make a friend of, even to please you. He's too damned conceited."

Minnie flushed; her lips moved in quick defence of William, then she closed them determinedly.

"Too—damned—superior," Peter said again, punctuating each word with a dab of the brush.

Minnie stooped to unfasten her shoes.

"Don't you really like him?" she asked after a moment.

"I think he's a conceited ass," Peter said boyishly. "But I rather like his wife. Sporting little woman."

"Yes, she's very pretty," Minnie agreed.

Peter had quite recovered himself; he began to whistle. Presently:

"What I said about not being able to take a

holiday was all rot, of course," he told her. "I've been thinking, as we're not buying the Chelsea house after all, we might as well go abroad. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You know I should love it."

"We'll make it a sort of second honeymoon, shall we?" he whispered, his arm round her slim body. "We'll forget everything and just enjoy ourselves."

"But—can we afford it?"

Peter laughed.

"We'll afford it somehow," he said. "You can write another book when we come home, eh? all about the wonderful places we shall see."

"Yes."

"Kiss me then, and say you love me."

"I love you, Peter dear."

"And I love you," said Peter. But he looked into her eyes with renewed anxiety. "You'll never love anyone else? Promise!"

"I promise."

After all, words could not hurt, she told herself with a little heartache, and at least they could comfort Peter, dear Peter, while they could neither spoil nor change her love for William.

But that night she went to bed for the first time for years without saying her prayers.

And when a day later a letter came from William she returned it to him unopened, enclosing a short note with it.

"Dear William,

"If you really love me, please never write to me again, or try to see me any more.

"Minnie."

It was early evening then, about an hour before Peter was due home, and she went downstairs to post the letter, calling to Quartus to come with her.

But the dog did not answer the call, and when she went to find him he was lying on the rug by the kitchen fire, his body curiously limp and shapeless and his eyes strangely glazed.

Minnie flung herself down beside him.

"Quartus—dear, dear old Quartus."

His grey feathery tail moved faintly, beat the floor once, and then with a last pitiful effort to move his head closer to her the old dog died.

"Quartus—dear, dear old Quartus."

She knelt beside him, sobbing broken-heartedly, one of his limp, heavy paws clasped in her hand.

Dead! and on this night of all nights when she had determined never to see William again. It seemed like a double snapping of the link which had for so long bound her to the man she loved.

And a little picture of the past rose before her: of the Saturday afternoon when William and the boy Tankerton had ridden down to Walton and of her own abrupt coming upon them with the dog—only a clumsy puppy then, all feet and tail —frisking around her. Of her own explanation:

"We call him Four, because he was the fourth puppy," and of William's characteristic reply:

"Oh! you should change it to Quartus! It sounds better. Quartus is Latin, you know."

"And put all stars and candles out
Ere we be young again."

It was gone—for ever! their precious youth! with all its mistakes and tears and laughter. Minnie felt as if she were kneeling beside its grave as she crouched sobbing over the old dog's dead body.

The striking of a cheap alarum clock on the kitchen mantelpiece roused her. Seven! Peter would be home in ten minutes and her letter still lay on the floor beside her.

She wiped her tears away, dropped a last passionate kiss on the grey, lifeless head of old Quartus, and slipped out of the house.

Grey evening was drawing down on the world and the street was full of shadows as she stood irresolute for a moment before the red pillar-box on the street corner, the letter clasped in her hand. She knew it was the right thing, the only thing to do. William was married, and she was married, so what could either of them hope to gain by prolonging a love which, while yet only half a step from heaven, might some day make hell for them both. But she kissed his name on

the envelope with trembling lips before she dropped it into the letter-box and turned away.

It was eight years before she saw William Winter again.

PART TWO

Part Two

Chapter XIV

THE war took the next five years of Minnie's life. The war, with its attendant horror and romance, and tears and bloodshed, took her in its merciless grip and moulded her in sterner lines.

After declaring that he would not fight for an ungrateful country until he was forced to do so, Peter came home early one afternoon in the winter of 1914 with a boyish apologetic look in his handsome eyes and the most appalling Tommy's uniform on his back, and announced that he had enlisted.

Minnie flew into his arms pale with fear.

"Peter, oh, Peter! why didn't you tell me?"

He kissed her rather absently, and put her gently from him in order to stare critically at his reflection in the looking-glass. Then he chuckled.

"Lord! what a sight for the gods!"

"I've never seen you look so handsome," Minnie declared proudly.

So Peter went to the war.

He made a will the night before he was sent

to France, and tried to instruct his wife in the management of her income.

"I've realised everything I can, and it will carry you on for a year or two comfortably," he said. "Then you've got your own work. The war won't make much difference to the sale of books, I should think; probably it will help it. I'm glad we didn't buy that house in Chelsea; you'll be more comfortable here." He rose to his feet, a fine, manly figure. "And if by any chance I don't come back," he said whimsically.

She clung to him weeping.

"Oh, Peter! *don't*—you are cruel!"

"I don't mean to be. But we must face facts. Oh, for God's sake don't cry," he added passionately, for the first time allowing her to see a glimpse of all that he himself suffered at the parting. "There! there! I shall be all right, of course I shall. I take a lot of killing. I shall turn up smiling again to bully you when the war's over, you see if I don't."

So Peter went to France, and the long, agonising months and years dragged along, punctuated by Peter's short unsatisfactory leaves and alternating hopes and fears. Minnie's sister Isobel was tragically widowed, and she was left with two spoilt, unruly children and nothing to live on but her pension. She wrote imploringly to Minnie, whom she had studiously avoided in the days of her own prosperity.

"I am off my head with grief and anxiety. We shall have nothing but my pension to live on. Can you help me? I haven't even been able to buy myself any respectable mourning."

Minnie sent her ten pounds and an invitation to bring the children and come and stay with her.

They arrived a week later, Isobel in a smother of widow's weeds, her pretty face spoilt by fretful lines of discontent, and with the two children clinging to her skirts. She looked round the little house disparagingly even while she kissed her sister.

"Heavens, what a small place!" she ejaculated. "I should have thought you would have bought something better than this with all the money you make."

"It's quite large enough for me," Minnie said offendedly, "and I don't make much money."

Isobel looked sceptical. "I read one of your books the other day," she said after a moment. She had taken off her heavily veiled hat and was powdering her nose. "I suppose it's all right, but I can't see what there is in it for people to rave about like they do. It's too sad! I like something more cheerful."

"I think life is sad," Minnie answered.

"I don't know why you need say that," Isobel objected. "If Peter is killed you'll have plenty of money, and you've got no children. I wish to goodness *I* hadn't," she added viciously.

Minnie made no comment, and after a moment Isobel asked:

"I suppose you never hear anything of William Winter? I thought I saw him the other day, but it wasn't he! Has he gone to the war?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about him."

"I always thought you two would make a match of it in the end," Isobel pursued tactlessly. "I believe he always really liked you, although you used to be so plain. Do you remember Ralph Tankerton? He was killed last week, and I hear he has left his wife pots of money. I could have married him if I'd liked. He asked me often enough. I wish now I had."

Minnie listened with a faint sense of repulsion, and yet she was sorry for Isobel, and more sorry for the two pale faced little girls who looked so much too old and grown up for their years.

"William won't ever marry," Isobel went on in her positive way. "He was too fond of all women ever to settle down with one."

"William is married," Minnie said. "He has been married nearly as long as I have." She rose. "If you are ready we'll have tea, shall we?"

She was wondering in dismay how long she would be able to put up with her sister's company. It seemed strange that they were sisters, and yet so utterly different.

"I shall marry a man with plenty of money

next time," Isobel said heartlessly when she had done recounting the many struggles and difficulties of her married life. "Of course, I always thought Francis had plenty. It only shows how he deceived me."

Minnie was glad when bedtime came. She went to her room with a sense of overwhelming relief, and threw open the window. Summer had gone, and there was a breath of autumn in the night air.

The street lay below, unbroken by light of any kind, and Minnie wondered with a little shiver of apprehension if perhaps it was prophetic of the rest of her life, if it was never again to be broken by happiness or sunshine. She dreamt of William Winter that night, dreamt that they were walking together through a wood carpeted with primroses that filled the air with their fragrance, and that when they came to the gate leading back into the road William stopped and put his arms round her and said, "I love you, I have never wanted any woman for my wife but you."

And then he bent to kiss her, but she woke up before their lips met and found it only a dream.

But in the morning there was a letter addressed in his handwriting lying on the hall table when she came downstairs. It bore the Censor's stamp and no postmark, and it was written in pencil on odd scraps of paper, and it was dated some three weeks previously.

"My Dear,

"I am so far away that perhaps I may be forgiven after all these long months for going against your wishes and writing to you. I so often think of you and wonder how you are faring, and last week I came across a copy of your latest book sent out with a batch of others to the hospital here, and although, as you know, I generally eschew the feminine novel, I began to read yours, and it is because you write so exactly as you speak that I feel I must for once risk your displeasure and send these few lines.

"We are not having too bad a time, but the worst thing is the deadly monotony of it all. One has so much time in which to think and to regret, and I find myself chiefly looking backwards twenty years or more—can it be so long ago?—to the days when you and I were boy and girl together. I am writing this letter by the insufficient light of a candle, and the picture that rises most often before me is of you as you were the night of our first childish tiff—do you remember?—when you came to the window to hear me say I was sorry and to receive a peace-offering of two pennyworth of chocolates? I can see your face still, after all this time, and remember my fear lest you should scorch your hair in the flame of the candle. And I find myself remembering the words of your poem and asking myself:

> *"'"How far is it to Babylon?"*
> *Ah, far enough, my dear,*
> *Far, far enough from here.*
> *Yet you have farther gone!'*

If one could only have things over again, or be given a second chance! . . . But enough of me and my retrospection. How are you? and will you write to me, I wonder? There is a man in this division who was in the same training camp as Laleham and seems to think very highly of him. I hope for your sake he is safe and well, and will come through unharmed. My wife is down in Devonshire with her parents. How do you spend your time these days? There are so many questions I should like to ask you, but I know you would not answer them. There

are so many things I long to tell you, but I realise the futility. Anyway, God bless you and keep you happy. Your latest book strikes me as being the work of a sad heart, and it hurts me to think that perhaps you are sad. Looking back, I so often seem to have seen you in distress or with tears in your eyes. I am sending this letter to the only address I know, and hope it may find you. Do you know that it is nearly three years since we met?

"Yours,

"WILLIAM."

Minnie read the letter through until she knew it by heart, then she took it with her to Laura Sylvestre's flat off Baker Street and burnt it in the big stove that warmed the studio.

She had felt a curious reluctance to destroy anything so precious in Peter's house. Besides, Isobel's eyes seemed to be everywhere, seeing everything, allowing nothing to pass unobserved.

"The ashes of the past, eh?" Laura asked cheerily, as she watched Minnie pick up the last scrap of paper which had fallen from between the bars to the hearth. "Wise woman! I suppose you know that little verse,

" 'Lives of great men all remind us,
As we o'er the pages turn,
Ne'er to die and leave behind us,
Letters which we ought to burn.' "

She laughed cheerily. "Good advice, isn't it? Think what a lot of trouble the world would be saved if nobody ever kept letters."

"It's very sad having to destroy them, all the same," Minnie said rather pathetically.

She came across the room and stood beside Laura's easel. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to draw a passionate embrace," Laura told her with sarcasm, "and never having experienced one I find it difficult.

Minnie laughed.

"It looks like the real thing, anyway," she said, her eyes on the sketchy outlines of the man and girl who were slowly taking form and life beneath Laura's skilful pencil.

She sat down on an orange coloured puff stool and leaned her chin in her hands, her eyes fixed on the little heap of grey ash in the grate, which was all the flames had left of William's letter.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to get on with Isobel for very long," she said reluctantly.

Laura raised her dark brows.

"I'm not surprised. However you two came to be sisters passes my comprehension."

There was a little silence.

"Have you heard from Peter lately?" Laura asked.

"Yes, last night. He's quite well and cheerful, and talks of getting leave next month. Laura, when do you think the war will end?"

"My dear, how can I possibly tell you? I only know that I thank God every night that Lionel

didn't have to go. I am wicked enough to be glad he has a weak heart."

Minnie did not answer. She was thinking that whatever happened in the future she would always be proud that her two men went. Her *two* men? How could she call William hers? And yet he was hers; he had always been hers.

"I know he can never be anything to me *really!*" she told herself. "But in my heart I can always pretend that he is."

There was no disloyalty to Peter in her mind; the two men were quite separate and distinct in her thoughts and in her life, and she was loyal to them both. Laura broke the silence again.

"Do you ever hear from that nice Mr. Winter?"

Minnie kept her eyes on the grey ash of William's letter.

"I've heard once since the war," she said. Then she rose to her feet with a sense of relief as the door opened and Lionel came in. His face brightened when he saw Minnie.

"I was thinking about you a moment ago," he said as they shook hands.

If he had spoken the truth he would have said that there were very few moments when he was not thinking of her, although as yet he had not realised what his sister's sharp eyes had discerned months before—that he loved Peter's wife.

He kept his eyes on her all the time he ate his

tea. There was something about her that always rested him and gave him a sense of peace.

He never criticised her, or even discussed her; he could probably not have told what was the colour of her eyes or of her hair, but she was there in his life, the one star in his firmament that could never be displaced from its high position.

Later in the evening he saw her home, fighting for a place for her on an overcrowded bus, perfectly happy just to be with her.

He left her at the gate of the little Chiswick house, and Minnie went in to find Isobel almost in hysterics, both the children crying, and a telegram from the War Office to say that Peter had been badly wounded.

So William's letter was never answered, and for three months Peter's life hung in the balance. He had a bullet in his right lung and a bad dose of gas, and whereas a man with a less fine constitution than his would have died Peter struggled valiantly through and came back to the little house in Chiswick a gaunt and very sick man, but on the sure road to recovery. Minnie and Peter's mother between them nursed him with unflagging devotion, but he was a bad patient, restless and unhappy at his enforced idleness. It worried him because with the declaration of peace everyone prophesied a boom in trade and he was not able to be there to get in on the tide. He

grew irritable and morose, and there were days when Minnie felt that she was at the end of her patience. Like many another gallant man, the war ruined Peter Laleham, changing his sweet good nature to bitterness and intolerance, until to his wife he sometimes seemed almost a stranger.

He was often unkind to her, and always inconsiderate and exacting, jealous whenever she left him even for an afternoon, and yet when she was with him he hardly spoke to her save to grumble.

"I'd leave him if I were you," Isobel often told Minnie. "Selfish great thing that he is! Why should you wear yourself to a shadow for him?"

Minnie flushed indignantly.

"He was hurt fighting for us," she protested in quick defence of her husband. "Nothing I can ever do for him would be half enough to make up."

Isobel shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, if you want to be a martyr," she said with a sneer, "there is nobody to stop you."

She had taken rooms quite close to Minnie, not because she bore her sister any great affection, but because she found her useful to borrow money from and useful to leave the children with when she herself wish to be free of them.

She privately considered Minnie a fool.

"With the money she makes she could have a wonderful time," was the thought always in her

mind. "I only wish I'd got her opportunities. I'd see the world and enjoy myself."

"I wish you'd tell your sister not to come here so often," Peter grumbled to his wife one day when the door had closed on Isobel. "I don't like her and I know she only comes for what she can get out of you. If we hadn't got a shilling in the world she'd stop coming here fast enough."

Minnie did not answer. This was one of Peter's favourite subjects of complaint, and experience had taught her the futility of attempting to argue or reason with him.

But this happened to be one of Peter's bad days, so after waiting vainly for his wife to speak he turned on her angrily.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" he demanded.

"Yes, Peter, of course I did."

The scowl deepened. "Then why the hell don't you answer?"

Minnie flushed crimson. It was not often Peter swore at her, and for once she was stung to retort: "Perhaps I will when you can speak like a gentleman."

That brought about the storm.

"Like a gentleman! So I'm no longer good enough for you, is that it? Because you can write a few stupid love stories! You've been giving yourself airs for a long time now, and because I've not said anything you need not think I'm too blind to notice it. A gentleman! Like

your friend Winter, I suppose, with his affected voice and superiority. I've always had my own ideas about you two. I haven't forgotten the night we had dinner with him. . . ."

"Peter!"

Peter laughed savagely.

"That hurts you, does it? You don't like to hear me sneer at him. Very well, I'll say no more, but if ever I catch the fellow anywhere near you again, or find him writing to you I'll——"

Minnie fled from the room. She was overwrought and tired. She locked her bedroom door and fell down beside the bed, her face buried in the quilt.

"It's the war, the cruel war," she told herself sobbingly. "It's not Peter who speaks to me like that—Peter would never say such horrible things."

But although she had not been in the wrong, she went to Peter later in the evening and made a timid little overture of peace.

"Peter, don't be cross and unkind any more, dear."

Peter raised his brooding eyes from a book he was pretending to read.

"Cross and unkind!" he repeated violently, "I like your way of putting me in the wrong just because I choose to object to another man being too friendly with you. If you think you can

throw dust in my eyes in that way you won't succeed." He caught her roughly by the wrist, peering up into her face.

"What have you been crying for?" he demanded. "Haven't you heard from him lately, or——"

Minnie tore herself free. "You must be mad!" she panted. "You must be mad to insult me so. I'll never speak to you again unless you apologise."

She locked her door against him that night for the first time since their marriage, and though later she heard his fingers on the handle and then his heavy step passing the door to the spare room she did not move.

But it took her a long while to fall asleep, and even then she woke almost immediately with a fiercely beating heart and a sense of disaster.

Peter! She flew out of bed and along the passage to his room.

The door was ajar, and when with a shaking hand she put on the light she saw Peter lying on the bed only partially undressed, as white as death, while the pillow beneath his head was ominously stained with blood.

"Peter, dear Peter!" she wailed.

Peter's pallid lips moved. "I tried to call——" he began thickly. Then the terrible hæmorrhage came again, almost choking him.

Chapter XV

IN the morning the doctor spoke very gravely to Minnie.

"A sea voyage is the only thing for him. Get him away from London and from all worry. He's fretting about business affairs, I know. Well, get him away from them, and, if possible, keep him out of England for a year or two. South Africa is the place. Do you think you can persuade him to go?"

It was difficult, but Minnie and Peter's mother managed it between them.

"I've got a brother in South Africa," Minnie told Mrs. Laleham. "I haven't heard from him since the beginning of the war. He joined up, of course, and was sent to German East, but I dare say he's back again now, and it would be nice to see him."

"Somebody else to sponge on you, I suppose," Peter growled, when she spoke to him of Ronald. "One good thing, we shall get away from Isobel."

"Isobel hasn't done us any harm," Minnie said gently.

"No, and she hasn't done us any good, either," was Peter's retort. "How often do you give her money, I should like to know?"

"She's very poor, and there are the children."

Peter scowled.

"People have no right to bring children into the world if they can't leave them provided for," he said.

So altogether Minnie thought it would be a relief to get away from England for a time and from the many small worries and difficulties with which she had had to grapple, and there was only one regret in her heart as she watched the shores receding into misty distance—William!

If only she could have seen him for a moment just to say good-bye. That he was alive and well she knew, for Laura Sylvestre had come across him recently at a dance, and had apparently spent the greater part of the evening in his company.

Her quick eyes had seen the flash of eagerness in Minnie's at the mention of his name, although she had only asked one question.

"Has he altered?"

Laura shook her head.

"No, he looked just the same to me. His hair is a little greyer, perhaps, but otherwise I didn't see any difference."

She did not tell Minnie that William's first enquiry had been for her.

So Minnie and Peter sailed away from England, and for nearly four years it knew them no more.

Hard, unhappy years they were for Minnie,

for, although the South African climate suited Peter and greatly improved his health, it did not improve his temper or his treatment of his wife. He neglected her more than he had done at home, and struck up a violent friendship with her brother Ronald, which took him into a drinking, card-playing set, and made him forget his business worries and disappointments. He often came home in the small hours of the morning noisy and unsteady on his feet, and Minnie would lie and shiver with dread of him until his heavy breathing told her that he slept.

She hated the life, although she did her best to hide it from the two men. The bare, ugly miles of country depressed her, and the cruel heat robbed her of all her strength. She would lie awake at night and long for the green trees and fields of England until it became an obsession, and all that held her was the knowledge that it meant life for Peter if they stayed and probable death if they went.

She had almost entirely given up writing, or only turned to it spasmodically. She seemed to have lost touch with everything now she was no longer in England; she was uninspired by South Africa, save with a great sadness, and she knew that the after-the-war reading public did not desire to be saddened, but cheered.

She still received royalties from her publishers in London on the books she had already written,

but they were urgently asking for fresh work. "Your great success ought to be followed up," so they wrote to her. Minnie knew they were right, and she tried to rouse herself from her inertia, but failed—it was too much trouble, too great a task.

She saw ambition slipping behind her and did not care, and while every day Peter grew stronger and more stalwart Minnie drooped and faded till she was so thin and pale that at last even the unimaginative Ronald noticed her delicate appearance and spoke of it to his brother-in-law.

The two men were smoking outside on the stoep when Ronald said abruptly:

"I say, what's wrong with Minnie? There's nothing of her."

Peter raised startled eyes. "Wrong with Minnie?"

She was always so patient and uncomplaining that in his man's blind way he had not noticed the great change in her, but now he rose at once and went into the house, where she was lying listlessly in a long cane-chair, an open book disregarded in her lap. Her eyes were closed, and she was so still and pale that his heart contracted with fear, thinking how much like death weary inertia could be, then he spoke her name sharply. "Minnie!"

She started and opened her eyes. "Yes, Peter?"

He strode across the room to her, gruff in his anxiety.

"Here, what's the matter with you? You look so ill! I . . . Minnie!"

She had tried hard to smile, tried to say that she was quite well, but it ended instead in a burst of nervous weeping.

Peter took her up in his arms and sat down with her in the long chair. She was so light, only like a child to lift and hold, that fresh fear seized him. Where had his selfish eyes been that he had not noticed the change in her? What sort of a brute was he that he had not seen? He held her silently in his arms and let her cry, only now and then awkwardly touching her hair with his lips, and then when she was quieter he said:

"Do you know what I am going to do with you, madam?"

"N-no, P-Peter."

"I'm going to send you home for six months."

She cried out in protest.

"Without you? I won't go."

"You'll do as I tell you," said Peter. "I've been a selfish hog and a brute long enough. You've worn yourself out nursing me and putting up with my abominable temper, and all the time it was you who needed the coddling and the cod liver oil."

She clung to him half laughing, half crying.

"I won't leave you. You'll get ill again. I

should not have a happy moment, wondering what you were doing." And she fell once more to that piteous nervous weeping.

Peter raised her head against his arm, forcing her to look at him.

"You mean you're afraid of—the drink?" He flushed hotly. "You need not be, dear. I'll give you my word of honour not to touch a drop from to-night until you come back. And I can keep a promise."

She cried out with trembling hope. "Oh, Peter, if you only would! It hurts me so. I've been so frightened." She hid her face in her shaking hands.

Peter sat very still, his handsome face red with shame, then he said rather pathetically:

"I've been a brute, I know, but I've always loved you, Minnie."

She put her arms round his neck then and buried her face in his shoulder.

"I thought you were tired of me, that you didn't like me any more. I've been so unhappy! Oh, Peter, promise me! Promise me."

"I promise you on my sacred word of honour, that I will not touch a drop of drink from the day you go away till the day you come back."

"If only you could come with me, Peter."

He shook his head.

"I won't do that for more than one reason. First because I think it will do you more good to

have a holiday without me, and then because Ronald and I have got a great business scheme which will make all our fortunes if it comes off. No, I shan't tell you what it is in case it should fail, but if it succeeds I'll send you a cable! You shall know first of all."

The old eager look of enthusiasm was in his eyes once more. The old Peter had come back. "If things turn out as we hope and expect," he went on, "you can stop writing stories. . . ."

She raised wet, indignant eyes.

"Oh, Peter, I love writing them."

He frowned. "I know you do, but it's not good for you to work so hard. Besides, I'd rather keep my own wife. I hate you being independent of me."

They sat talking late into the night—the happiest night Minnie had known since she left England—and before they went to bed she had promised Peter that she would go home as soon as it could be arranged.

"And come back with these hollows filled in," Peter commanded, touching her cheeks tenderly, "and some more flesh on this poor little body of yours."

She laughed.

"I'll come back so fat that you won't know me, Peter."

He made a little grimace.

"Oh, good Lord! Don't do that, or I shall get a divorce."

Then he kissed her with sudden passion and put her off his knee.

"This is a fine way to start turning over a new leaf. Look at the time! Past twelve! You ought to have been in bed and asleep hours ago." He rose to his feet, keeping an arm round her, looking anxiously down into her face.

"Happier?" he asked abruptly.

Minnie laid her cheek against his coat sleeve with a little sigh of contentment.

"Quite happy, Peter dear."

Chapter XVI

SO Minnie went home to England, and after the first wrench of parting from Peter she realised how very near she had been to a serious breakdown and how glad she was of a rest.

She spent most of the voyage on deck in the sunshine with the sea breezes beating softly on her face, and by the time the ship reached England she was looking so much better that Peter would hardly have recognised her.

He had cabled to Laura Sylvester and to his mother, and when the ship docked both the Sylvesters' were on the quay to meet her. It was a crisp December day, and although Minnie had expected to feel the sudden change of climate rather severely it seemed to serve as a tonic to her inertia.

"Oh, it's good, good to be home again!" she said, drawing a deep breath. "Oh, Laura! if only you knew how I'm longing to have a good sniff of London again. And you haven't altered a bit, either of you."

She was like an excited child, she hardly stopped talking and asking questions, and Lionel sat and watched her with adoring, contented eyes.

The last four years had been blank for him, but now life was full and happy once more.

He thought Minnie's face the most beautiful in the world, the sound of her laugh made his heart leap.

There was a letter from Peter's mother waiting at the Baker Street flat. It appeared that Mrs. Laleham was in the South of France under doctor's orders.

"He tells me I must not come back to England till February" (she wrote). "I have had a return of my old chest trouble, and at all costs I must avoid the damp and fog of London. But come to me whenever you are ready and as soon as Miss Sylvester can spare you. I shall love to have you, and I am longing to hear all about my boy."

There was also a characteristic letter from Isobel.

"I am not surprised to hear you are coming home, and only wonder how you have stood South Africa for so long. I am sure it is impossible to have a good time in such a country. I suppose with all your money you will stay at the Ritz, or some other smart hotel. I met a man the other day who knows your publishers, and he said he was sure you must be making at least two thousand a year. Lucky girl! How I envy you!"

"I suppose your mother-in-law wants you to go to her at once," Laura said. She was watching Minnie with a shade of anxiety in her eyes. "Of course, it's only natural she should, as you are her son's wife. We must not be selfish and expect to keep you all the time."

"She's in France," Minnie said. "She says I can go to her when I like, but——"

Lionel interrupted eagerly.

"Oh, but you can't go yet. We've made ever so many plans for you, Minnie! To begin with we want to take you with us to Switzerland for Christmas to the winter sports. We went last year, you know, and had a splendid time."

Minnie laughed.

"Winter sports! I've never done any in my life. Why, I've never even had a pair of skates on."

"Neither had I till last year, but it's wonderful how soon one picks it up," Lionel urged eagerly.

Minnie shook her head.

"I'm quite sure I could not! I'm no good at any games or sports."

Laura slipped a hand through her arm. "Well, come and take your hat off, and we'll talk about it another time."

"You'll never persuade me," Minnie declared.

Laura stayed in the room while she took off her hat and coat and unpacked her luggage.

There was something a little strange and diffident in her manner which puzzled Minnie, though in her unsuspecting way she put it down to their long separation, till suddenly Laura said:

"Minnie, who do you think was here the other night?"

Minnie looked up from her unpacking.

"I can't guess. Anyone I know?"

"Yes."

"I can't guess. It seems so long since I was home, I have almost forgotten people. Tell me."

"It was Mr. Winter."

Minnie rose slowly to her feet, a little flush in her cheeks, her eyes incredulous.

"William! Here?" she said blankly.

"Yes." Laura kept her eyes averted. "You know I told you we met at a dance just before you went away?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I asked him then to call if he was ever anywhere near, and about a year ago he walked in one evening."

"Yes." Minnie's lips quivered into a smile. She knew William's unexpected way of walking in.

"Did he bring his wife?" she asked.

"No, and Minnie . . ." There was a little breathless note in Laura's voice, "I didn't tell you when I wrote, I thought he might not like me to tell you, but—she has left him—his wife has left him."

"Left him!" Minnie put one hand on the bed-rail to steady herself.

"*Left* him?" she said once more stiffly.

"Yes." Laura looked up and quickly down again. "He told me all about it, in confidence, of course, but I know I can trust you not to repeat

it. It was during the war—or just afterwards. There was some other man she met while William —while Mr. Winter was in the Army. She went away with him, and Mr. Winter has divorced her."

Minnie stood very still, thought seemed difficult. William had divorced his wife—then he was free! Free to marry again. Her eyes came back to Laura with a sudden incomplete suspicion.

"I think you might have told me," she said with an effort. "You might have known I should be —interested."

"I didn't know if Mr. Winter would like you to know," Laura excused herself. "I thought if he wanted you to know he would tell you himself."

"Yes, yes, of course."

Minnie's thoughts were still wool-gathering, and she felt curiously detached, as if she were politely listening to something which did not personally concern her.

"So William has been here to see you," she said presently, with an effort to speak naturally.

"Yes, he's been several times, and he and Lionel get on splendidly together."

"I'm glad. I knew you would like him."

Minnie began to take down her hair. For the first time she realised that her head ached.

"Does he know I am coming home?" she asked.

"No. You see"—there was a curious little self-consciousness in Laura's manner as she went on—"you see, he's in Switzerland now—as a matter of fact he went out before we got Peter's cable."

"Oh!"

Laura raised her eyes quickly at that little exclamation; it sounded almost like a protest of pain, but it was not possible to judge anything from Minnie's face. She looked preoccupied and a little tired, but that was all.

"So I suppose you are going to Switzerland to join him, is that it?" she asked lightly.

"Yes. At least, we were all there together last year, you see, and he thought it would be nice if we all met at the same place again."

"Yes, of course, very nice."

There was a little silence, broken by Lionel calling across the passage: "Supper is ready, Laura. Shall you be long?"

Laura turned quickly as though glad of an excuse to escape.

"I'll just see if everything's all right. Come when you are ready, Minnie."

"Yes."

The door shut between them, and Minnie's arms fell limply to her sides.

Laura was going to Switzerland to join William! And William was free! Free to marry again if he chose.

"He told me in confidence." Her friend's words stung her.

What degree of friendship or of affection already existed between them? Minnie tried in vain to stifle the jealousy in her heart, but it was like an unseen fire which has smouldered for long in the darkness, rising at last and bursting into flame.

She tried to think only of Peter and his love for her, but Peter seemed unreal and far away. She could only see William's eyes as they had looked so long ago when he said, "You are the only woman I have ever wanted for my wife."

Could he still truthfully say that, or had he forgotten? How dared she ask herself? What did it matter to her? She shut her eyes desperately and tried to pray, but God seemed even further away to-night than Peter—dear Peter, whom in her thoughts she was so foully betraying.

Laura came tapping at the door.

"What a long time you are! Supper is getting cold."

"I'm so sorry. I'm just coming."

She washed her face and hands hurriedly, trying to control her thoughts, but they were fluttering like wild birds over the past and ahead into the future. It was so long since she and William had met—eight years! She was past thirty now, and he . . . ! Ah, but men did not age so

quickly as women. She crossed the room and looked at herself in the glass. Such a pale face, such a tired face, even though she felt so much better for the voyage; and last night she had seen some grey threads in her soft brown hair.

Laura looked quite young still; there were no lines in her face, no tired shadows beneath her eyes. And Laura was free!

There was a strange new feeling of antagonism in her heart towards Laura which frightened her. Laura and she had been such friends —they had never missed writing to one another every week since Minnie left England, but Laura had not spoken of her meeting with William. She had not once mentioned his name. "He belongs to me! he belongs to me!" Minnie told herself fiercely, her hands clenched and her whole body shaken with sudden passion. Then she gave a little stifled cry of pain and shame and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, what can I do? I wish I had not come home. Oh, I'm wicked! wicked!"

Laura called again from across the landing, and with a supreme effort Minnie roused herself and went in to supper.

The room was lamp-lit and fire-lit, and the soft artistic tones of its wall coverings and decorations soothed her agitation a little.

Lionel, watching her with faithful eyes,

thought how much she had changed, and yet how sweet she was. They were all rather silent.

"I expect you would like to go to bed early to-night, wouldn't you?" Laura asked when the meal was ended. "I'm sure you must be tired. We'll do all our talking to-morrow."

Minnie took the opportunity gladly, but once in the shelter of her own room she made no attempt to go to bed, but put out the light and sat down by the window looking out into the darkness and listening to the sound of the traffic passing up and down Baker Street.

Already she felt that she had never left England and the past eight years seemed wiped out and as if they had never been. She was back amongst the old familiar scenes, with the same sense of loss and heartache which she had experienced years ago when she had walked into Rosa's drawing-room and found William there. There had always been some other woman in his life, filling the place which she had longed to fill. It was Laura's turn now. Laura who had been her friend. And once again Minnie wished most passionately that she had not come home.

Out there in the ugliness and exile of South Africa she had been able to think of William without bitterness or jealousy as one may think of a loved one long dead, with deep tenderness and faithful remembrance, but without any pain. And now it had all come back again, the restless-

ness and sense of loss, and added to it a new, strange feeling—desire.

He belonged to her and she belonged to him, and yet always between them lay life and its thousand and one exigencies.

And now Laura was going out to Switzerland to be with him.

"I will not go with them! I will not go!" Minnie told herself passionately as she undressed in the dark and crept into bed.

"I will not go! I will not go!" she told herself a thousand times during the wakeful, feverish night.

But in her heart she knew that she would.

Chapter XVII

THE night before Minnie and the Sylvesters left for Switzerland Laura came into Minnie's room while she was undressing and sat down on the side of the bed. Although the two girls were outwardly still the best of friends, each of them was conscious that in some subtle way that friendship had changed. A faint distrust and jealousy had crept into it, and a cloud which was only the size and shape of a man's hand had spoilt the sunshine of its sincerity. A shadow of that cloud was in Laura's eyes now as she leaned her chin on the brass bedrail and looked at Minnie.

"I never painted you, after all," she said with sudden abruptness. "I always meant to. Do you remember?"

"Yes, but I went away and there wasn't time." Minnie turned round, her long, straight hair falling over the shoulders of her nightgown, framing her pale face. "You shall do it while I am home this time," she said, "and I'll take it back to Peter for a present—that is, if you still want to paint me."

Laura nodded.

"I do. I believe I could do great things with

your eyes and mouth." She knitted her dark brows critically. "Minnie, does Peter love you very much?" she asked abruptly.

The unexpected question brought a quick flush to Minnie's face, but she answered at once: "Yes, I am sure he does."

"I am sure he does too," Laura assented. "And that's why I'm surprised he let you come home without him."

Minnie opened her eyes wide. "Why, what do you mean?"

Laura laughed a little.

"I mean that things happen to people with eyes like yours," she said vaguely.

Minnie turned round and looked at herself in the mirror.

"What is wrong with my eyes?" she asked in perplexity.

"They're tragic," Laura said. "Or, rather, I should say that there is tragedy in them." She rose from the bed yawning and stretching her arms. "Well, I must go, or I shall lose my beauty sleep." She paused a moment beside Minnie's packed and corded trunk. "Are you all packed up ready?" she enquired.

"Yes—everything."

"Well, get a good night then. We shan't be able to sleep much in the train to-morrow night."

She dropped a perfunctory kiss on Minnie's cheek and turned to the door.

"I'll do that portrait for you to take to Peter when we come back from Switzerland," she promised, and went away.

Minnie finished brushing her hair with hands that trembled. Only another twenty-four hours and then she would see William. Twenty-four hours! Oh, why couldn't the hands of the clock carry the time away more quickly. She tried to check her excitement.

Perhaps William would not be glad to see her; perhaps he had forgotten her. She would know as soon as she met his eyes whether he was glad or not. They had kept her coming a secret. Lionel had just written that they were bringing a friend with them. Minnie did not know whether Laura had written to William or not. They seldom spoke of him, but in another twenty-four hours now they would be with him.

Had the eight years changed him much? He must be nearly forty—nearly forty! More than twenty years ago since they had sat together in the sunshine fishing for crabs; more than twenty years ago since William had first kissed her. Would he ever kiss her again, she wondered? Then her face burned with shame at the thought, and she put out the light quickly and crept into bed as if afraid someone could see her.

In the morning just before they started a cable came from Peter.

"Yours received. We are both well and all promises kept. Have a good time. Love. Peter."

Minnie had cabled him of her safe arrival, and this was his reply.

"How nice of him!" Laura said, "and how fortunate it came just before we left."

But Peter's message had touched Minnie's heart with a chill remorse. Why was she going to Switzerland? She ought not to go! Peter would hate her being where William was! She was being disloyal to Peter, who was always so loyal to her.

She looked round the studio, dismantled and tidy, ready for their departure.

There was still time for her to change her mind. Laura would not care! Laura would be glad. She could go to France, to Peter's mother.

"The taxi's here," said Lionel at the door. "I've got all the baggage on. Is this your coat, Minnie?"

"Yes."

"Come along, then."

Minnie followed him with slow steps.

It was a bright, fresh morning, and in the hurry and excitement of the journey forebodings were forgotten. They had a perfect crossing; the Channel was as smooth as it is on a windless summer's day, and Minnie's eyes glowed as she stood at the end of the boat looking back at the white Dover cliffs.

Her thoughts were in a whirl, and her pulses raced unevenly.

Laura joined her presently.

"There are some people on the boat who were with us in Switzerland last year," she said, "a girl and her aunt. Isn't it queer? I never cared for them very much; their name is Spense, and they come from Manchester." She laughed. "We used to call the girl the 'Manchester Minx,'" she added. "She was such a flirt and so cheeky. Here they come with Lionel—the Minx rather likes him, I think."

Lionel joined them, laughing happily enough. He had an elderly lady in a plaid coat and a thick blue veil on one side of him, and a girl in a very short skirt and smart shoes on the other.

He introduced them to Minnie.

"Miss Spense—Mrs. Laleham—Miss Peggie Spense. We were all in Switzerland together last year," he added.

Minnie shook hands with them both. She could not see much of the elderly lady's face beneath the blue veil, but she thought the Manchester Minx very pretty. She had wide, forget-me-not coloured eyes, with black curling lashes, and a charming tip-tilted nose. She looked at Minnie with frank interest.

"Can you skate?" she demanded. Minnie shook her head.

"I'm afraid not!"

The forget-me-not eyes opened wider.

"Can you ski?"

"No."

"Bob then? Is that your sport?"

Minnie laughed rather nervously.

"I'm afraid I don't do anything. This is the first time I've been out to Switzerland."

"Oh!" The Manchester Minx seemed to lose interest in Minnie after that; she turned away and entered into a lively discussion with Lionel as to what she meant to do on her arrival.

"I'm going in for the big bob race this year, no matter what old Adelbert says. I'm quite capable of taking the wheel, don't you think I am?"

"She and Lionel won lots of races together last year," Laura explained to Minnie. "She's as daring as a boy. I'm always afraid she'll come to grief."

"And who is old Adelbert?" Minnie asked. She felt as if she was about to step into another world of which she knew nothing.

"Adelbert runs the sports," Laura answered. "He's a Swiss guide really, and lives in the village. His brother is the village doctor. Mr. Winter always teases them, and declares that one helps us break our bones for the other one to mend."

"Well, I hope I shan't break any," Minnie said apprehensively.

"Oh, you wont!" Laura told her lightly. "It's only the people who are good at the sports who hurt themselves. The amateurs are too careful."

"Oh!"

When they reached Calais the Manchester Minx tried to appropriate Lionel.

"Are you going to be an angel and get our baggage together, Mr. Sylvester?" she demanded

Lionel laughed.

"There's nothing I should like better," he answered, "only unfortunately I have two ladies of my own who have a prior claim on my angelic aspirations." He turned to Minnie. "Let me take your coat, Mrs. Laleham."

The Manchester Minx met Minnie's eyes and frowned. Last winter Lionel had been her willing slave; apparently someone else was to share the honours now.

"Who is the lady with the Sylvesters, dear?" Miss Spense asked her niece as they moved towards the gangway. "I didn't catch her name."

The nose of the Manchester Minx became more tip-tilted than usual.

"Laleham, I think the name was," she said disdainfully. "Awfully plain, isn't she?"

"Do you think so? I thought she had rather a charming face," Miss Spense said mildly. "Such very expressive eyes!"

* * * * * * *

The rest of the journey was like a dream to Minnie—the long night hours during which the train rumbled through the darkness, the strange foreign voices of the officials, and the many jerky stoppings at wayside stations. They had not been able to secure sleeping berths as the train was so crowded, but Lionel found a seat in a smoker so as to give up the whole carriage to his sister and Minnie.

Laura had taken off her hat and her shoes, rolled herself in a rug, and now lay stretched at full length on one of the long seats.

"I can always sleep quite comfortably," she said. "Put the light out when you're ready."

Minnie put the light out at once, but she knew she would not be able to sleep.

She lay with her head on a pillow which Lionel had secured for her, her eyes wide open.

In the next compartment people were talking and laughing together in a foreign tongue, and once or twice Lionel came along the corridor and looked in at them.

"Can't you sleep?" he asked Minnie, meeting her wide open eyes through the subdued light.

She shook her head.

"I never felt more awake in my life," she said.

He smiled sympathetically.

"That's how I feel too. I never can sleep on a train. Laura can though, as sound as a top."

He touched his sister's shoulder, but she never stirred.

"Fast asleep!" he said.

"Yes."

The next time he came he told her it had been snowing.

"Haven't you felt how much colder it is? Come out and look. It's moonlight now, a perfectly heavenly night."

Minnie went with him into the corridor.

The night was swept by moonlight and hung with stars, beneath which the earth lay wrapped in a mantle of white.

Minnie caught her breath with a little gasp of wonder.

"Oh, how lovely! Will it be like that in Switzerland?"

"Better than that," he told her. "Last year we had three feet of snow and bright sunshine as well."

"I wish Peter could see it," Minnie said, and she thought of Peter with a sense of aching pity. To be out there in the heat and dust and ugliness of South Africa instead of here seemed a tragedy.

"What is the time?" she asked.

Lionel consulted his watch.

"It's nearly three. I wish you could go to sleep. You'll be worn out to-morrow."

Minnie laughed softly.

"I've never felt so fresh and ready to do things in all my life."

"That's Switzerland," he told her. "It's the most wonderful air in the world."

The train ran into a tunnel, which shut out the moonlight and the snow, and Minnie went back to her compartment and wrapping herself in her rug again fell asleep almost at once.

It was broad daylight when she awoke.

Laura was sitting up tidying her hair, and outside the snow was falling fast.

Trees and hedges were weighted down with it, and now and then large black birds flew like dark shadows across the fields of untrodden white.

"We're well up to time," Laura said practically, "we shall be in to lunch."

"To lunch!" Minnie's heart leapt. What would William say when he saw her? Would he be glad? She combed out her hair and put on her hat again. Lionel came to the door.

"We can have breakfast at Lucerne," he told them. "We have seventy-five minutes to wait for the steamer."

Minnie raised excited eyes.

"Oh, do we go on the lake?"

"We cross it, and then take a mountain railway." It was all like a dream.

The rolls and butter and hot coffee in the little hotel by the lake. The great stove crackling and roaring in a corner. The little Swiss man with

the waxed moustache and spotless apron who served them, and then the small, fussy little steamboat which churned its way across the deep, cold waters of the lake. The air was like champagne; Minnie's pale cheeks glowed, and her eyes were full of awe as she looked at the snowy mountains which seemed to shut them in on every side.

"And to think that they've been here for thousands of years before us and will be here for thousands more after we have gone," she said.

The Manchester Minx, who had joined them on the boat, stared at her with round forget-me-not eyes.

"What a queer thing to think of," she said. She went off reluctantly in response to a call from Miss Spense.

"Auntie always insists that she is going to be sick," she told Lionel with a little grimace. "And there isn't a ripple! How could anybody be sick, I ask you?"

They shared a carriage in the little mountain railway. The Manchester Minx never stopped talking. She was not in the least awed by the beauty of the scenery; she kept saying that she wished the train would hurry up.

"I'm hungry, I want my lunch," she complained.

"You've been eating ever since we left home," her aunt chided her.

Laura was speculating as to who they would find in the hotel.

"I suppose old Stamford will be there, and the Traceys, and Mrs. Yates. I wonder what man she will appropriate this year," she added unkindly. She looked at Minnie. "Mrs. Yates ran after Mr. Winter last year in the most barefaced manner," she said.

"Did she?" Minnie answered absently. She was standing at the open window looking out at the wonderful panorama which was slipping away beneath them—a spotless world of indescribable beauty. On one side of the little railway was a sheer drop into a wooded valley, and on the other the steep side of a rocky mountain.

The world seemed wrapped in majestic loveliness and a great silence, which was only broken by the straining efforts of the slowly climbing train and a distant sound of falling water. Presently Lionel came to stand beside her.

"We shouldn't have much chance if the train went over, should we?" he said rather grimly.

Minnie looked down into the depths of the valley and smiled. What a strange thing to think of, she thought, and wondered if she was the only one to whom the snow-clad world said such wonderful and unutterable things.

A loud yawn came from the Manchester Minx.

"Only another ten minutes, thank the Lord!" she said sententiously.

Minnie's heart gave a great throb, then seemed almost to stop beating.

Only another ten minutes and she would be face to face with William again, after eight years!

The little train creaked, rocked, and came to a protesting standstill, and instantly the Manchester Minx had torn open the door and was out on the snowy platform looking eagerly up and down, evidently for someone she expected, then she uttered a wild "Hullo!" and hurled herself towards a tall, freckled young man in breeches and heavy ski-ing boots who came sheepishly towards her.

Lionel was helping Minnie into her coat.

"It's only a step to the hotel, but it's cold. You'd better put it on."

She obeyed silently. She could not have spoken had her life depended on it. Then out of the noise and clamour of greeting around her she heard a voice which for the moment almost stopped her pulses.

"Here you all are then! and the train is punctual for once! Wonders will never cease. How are you, Sylvester? Had a comfortable journey? How are you, Laura?"

So he called Laura by her Christian name! That was the quick, jealous thought in Minnie's mind as she turned round and found herself face to face with William Winter.

There was a poignant, flashing moment, then William laughed and held out his hand.

"Minnie! By all that's wonderful. So this is the great surprise for which I was to be prepared."

He held out his hand, and Minnie puts hers into it. Such an uneventful meeting after all—nothing to betray the feelings of either of them, no landmark of any importance which she could store up in the treasure house of memory for the future.

And then they were all walking out of the station.

A porter from the hotel led the way, followed by Laura and Lionel, William and Minnie.

William went on talking, and she heard him through the mists of a great unreality.

"Laura told me they were bringing a surprise for me, but I never expected you. When did you come home, and where is Laleham?"

She answered at random.

"I came home a fortnight ago. I wasn't well. South Africa never suited me. Peter is out there still. I am going back in May. Laura and Lionel persuaded me to come here with them." She stopped, realising that what she said was not quite true. Laura had never tried to persuade her; she had only acquiesced.

She knew that William was looking at her. She wondered if he was finding her much changed.

Presently he said, with the well-remembered note of unwilling emotion in his voice:

"It's good to see you again after all these years, Minnie."

She raised her eyes.

"I'm glad to see you too."

He had altered so very little. Older, perhaps, and a little greyer, but his eyes were unchanged, and his smile!

Then they were in the hotel, and Laura and Lionel were immediately surrounded by a group of men and girls who had known them last year, and Minnie stood silently by, shy and unnoticed, wondering whether she would ever feel at home and friendly with all these people who looked so thoroughly Bohemian in their breeches and short skirts and bright-coloured blazers and woolly caps.

The hotel was not very large, but the rooms were spacious and airy and well warmed.

There was an appetising smell of something good cooking, and the Manchester Minx broke out again, "Oh, I'm so hungry! I'm starving!"

"I think we all are," Lionel struck in. He glanced at Minnie. She had lost her colour and looked tired.

"You'd like to go to your room, wouldn't you?" he said. "Laura, Mrs. Laleham would like to go to her room."

They went up in a queer little boxlike lift to the

second floor and along a wide passage, the floor of which was covered with gaily coloured matting, and a fair-haired Swiss girl showed them their rooms.

The length of the corridor divided them, and Minnie said in dismay:

"Oh, I thought I should be close to you, Laura."

Laura laughed.

"These are the only rooms we could get, and Christine will look after you and see you are not lonely." She turned to the Swiss girl. "Christine, this is Mrs. Laleham."

Christine smiled and dropped a little curtsey.

"Madame est fatigué, hey?" she enquired. "Madame vash, is it not so? *De l'eau chaud?"*

She vanished, to reappear again with a copper jug full of hot water, which she poured out into the basin, chattering in broken words all the time. Half German, half French, with a few words of English interspersed, she laughed and gesticulated and managed to make herself understood.

Minnie thought of her luckless attempt of years ago to recite to William in French and laughed sympathetically.

"I think I shall like you, Christine," she said shyly. Christine understood that.

"Me—I—shall like madam also," she answered eagerly.

Chapter XVIII

BEFORE the first day was over Minnie wished she had not come. She had been about so little that she was too shy to make friends easily, and after one or two overtures from girls to whom Laura introduced her she felt that she was doomed to be left alone.

"Can you skate? Do you ski? How many times have you been out before?" She grew tired of answering the same questions. Everyone seemed proficient at one sport or another except herself; everyone was full of plans for to-morrow, and the day after, and the day after that.

She heard the Manchester Minx fixing up a bob race with Adelbert the guide, a young man with a small Vandyck beard and keen eyes that had looked out all his life on mountain precipices and avalanches unafraid.

There was a red-haired woman, Mrs. Yates, to whom Minnie was introduced, who seemed never to be without a cigarette between her reddened lips, and a man following in her train; and there was old Stamford, who peered at her kindly with short-sighted eyes, and who promised that in the morning he would teach her how to ski.

"I've been out here every winter for forty years

except during the war," he told her, "and I'm as much at home on skis as I am in my bare feet, more so, if anything!"

Minnie smiled at him shyly.

"Are you? How wonderful! I'm afraid a shall never be any good at anything, I'm too frightened."

"Frightened, pooh!" he said cheerily. "What is there to be frightened of? I'm seventy-three, and I'm not frightened. I glory in the speed. I can come down Freyberg still with the best of them."

"What is Freyberg?" Minnie asked kindly. He peered down at her more closely, as if unable to credit her ignorance.

"Freyberg is a mountain, madam, a wonderful mountain to which you must be introduced without delay. You will not have really lived until you have come down Freyberg through the snow and sunshine on skis!"

Minnie laughed ruefully.

"Mr. Sylvester says I shall not have lived until I have come down the bob run at—I forget how many hundred miles a minute," she said ruefully.

Old Stamford shook his head.

"Now I don't altogether approve of the bob run," he said sententiously. "It's the one thing I have never attempted, though probably you would enjoy it. That little girl from Manchester goes down a dozen times a day, I believe."

"I don't think there is much fear that I shall," Minnie said, and for the twentieth time she wished she was as young as the Manchester Minx and as fearless.

Then there was Colonel Lawrence—a tall, thin man with the longest arms and the biggest feet Minnie had ever seen. He was captain of the Curling Club and the keenest bridge player in the hotel.

"Do you play bridge?" he demanded when they were introduced, extending a long, limp hand for Minnie to shake, and when she told him no, or at least only very badly, he lost interest in her at once and walked away.

It was only after dinner, when the band was playing and most of the people were dancing, that William came across the lounge and sat down beside her.

"Do you dance?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No, I don't do anything. I've had to say no to everything at least a hundred times this evening. I think people are beginning to wonder why I have come here at all."

"You'll soon learn to do as well as the rest of us," he told her.

Minnie smiled.

"You don't mean that, or, at least, if you do, you must have forgotten how very few things I have ever been able to do, William."

His brown eyes rested on her face with their old melting look.

"There is one thing you have done which no other woman I have ever known has been able to do," he said quietly.

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Keep a man unchanging in his love for you," said William.

The hot blood rushed headlong to her face at the unexpectedness of the reply.

"You must not say those things to me," she said with stiff lips, though her heart was beating like a drum.

"Why not, if it's the truth?" he asked obstinately.

Her face quivered into a faint smile.

"When you have not seen me for eight years," she protested gently.

"Eight years, or eighty, it would make no difference," William said, and for a little while they were both silent.

"And what have you been doing all this time?" Minnie asked at last.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, chiefly loafing, I am afraid. When the war was over I made up my mind to take a long holiday." He smiled, meeting her eyes. "Well, I am still taking it."

"I see."

"And you?" William asked. "What have you

been doing? I heard that Laleham was badly wounded and that you had both gone abroad."

"Yes, but he is much better now, ever so much better."

"I am glad to hear it. And so you did not like South Africa?"

"No"—she gave a quick sigh—"I am afraid I was terribly homesick all the time. I tried to hide it, but I don't think I am very good at hiding things."

"You managed to hide one thing from me very successfully for a great many years," William said.

She did not ask what it was, but her hands made a little spasmodic movement of protest.

"I mean the answer to a question I asked you that night at the Savoy," William persisted.

She found her voice with an effort.

"I have forgotten what the question was."

He ignored the trouble in her face. He told her ruthlessly.

"I asked if there was ever a time when you would have married me."

She tried to laugh, but her voice was broken up and nervous.

"How can I remember? It's so long ago."

"My dear, don't play with me," said William steadily. "You've nothing to fear from me. I love you with all my heart and soul, but I honour

you even more. You have nothing to fear from me."

She turned her head sharply away to hide the tears that rose to her eyes, and William went on:

"When I saw you at the station this morning I was happy for the first time since I last saw you. Minnie, why didn't you answer the letter I wrote you from Mesopotamia? It reached you, I suppose?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"Why didn't you answer it then? It could have done no harm, and it would have meant a great deal to me."

"I couldn't! It didn't seem right. Besides, what could I write?"

He smiled at that. "If you had only written, 'Dear Mr. Winter, I am quite well, Minnie,' I should have been satisfied," he told her whimsically.

She sought for further excuses.

"It was just then that Peter was wounded. I went out to France. They thought he would die. Afterwards I nursed him at home for months."

"Lucky Peter," said William.

"He loves me," Minnie answered.

"So do I," said William.

Minnie said again: "You ought not to talk to me like that."

"What harm can it do if you care nothing for me?" he asked, "and it gives me some small satis-

faction. Every time I look at you I want to say, 'I love you—I love you.' "

"Oh, William! please!"

He laughed roughly.

"That makes you angry! Very well, I won't offend again. Here comes Mrs. Yates."

Mrs. Yates came across the lounge with a great rustling of brocade and a glitter of diamonds. She would have been a good-looking woman if she had made up less, and she had a superb figure.

William rose to his feet, but she had not come to speak with him. She took his vacant chair beside Minnie and began in her gushing voice:

"Mrs. Laleham, I've just found out from Miss Sylvester that it is you who wrote that lovely book, 'The End of the Day.' I must tell you how much I enjoyed it! It's not often a book makes me cry, but I assure you that I shed copious tears over this one. Mr. Winter, why didn't you tell me that we had a famous authoress coming to stay amongst us?"

"For the very simple reason that I did not know," William said. "It was a great surprise to me to see Mrs. Laleham, I assure you."

"And yet I hear that you have known one another all your lives," Mrs. Yates pursued. She had spent a profitable half-hour extracting information from Laura. She was one of those women who like to know everything.

"I knew Mrs. Laleham when she was a small

girl in a sun-bonnet," William said. "But we have not met for eight years."

"Dear me, how very interesting!" Mrs. Yates took a cigarette from a jewelled tortoiseshell case. "Do you smoke?" she asked Minnie.

Minnie smiled and shook her head.

"I have to say 'No' once again," she said to William.

"I thought all our modern authoresses smoked," Mrs. Yates protested. She took a light from William. "How very nice and old-fashioned of you, Mrs. Laleham."

The band struck up a fresh foxtrot, and she rose, laying her hand on William's arm.

"Shall we dance, Mr. Winter?"

She carried him off, and Minnie was left alone. She felt tired now—tired with the excitement and emotions of the day, and she longed to go to her room and be quiet.

The Manchester Minx had inaugurated some hurdle races on her own account over chairs at the far end of the lounge, and had drawn half a dozen young men into the game. Their noise and laughter almost drowned the band. Minnie rose and slipped across to Laura, who was talking to Adelbert the guide.

Minnie touched her arm.

"I'm so tired. I'm going to bed. Good-night."

Laura turned.

"Good-night, and pleasant dreams," she said in a preoccupied way.

Minnie went upstairs, and just as she disappeared William came back from the ballroom with Mrs. Yates. His eyes searched the lounge quickly; he went straight to Laura.

"Where is Minnie?"

There was an unmistakable anxiety in his voice, and Laura's face changed as she answered.

"She was tired. She has gone to bed."

He made no comment, and she asked lightly:

"Weren't you surprised to see her this morning? It must be ever so long since you two met."

"Eight years," William said.

Laura laughed, not quite naturally.

"I should almost have thought you would have forgotten her," she challenged him.

William glanced across the lounge towards the stairs.

"My memory is exceedingly good where some people are concerned," he answered.

Chapter XIX

IT took a very few days to confirm Minnie's first fear that she had made a mistake in coming to Switzerland.

Naturally shy and sensitive, she could not feel at her ease or grow accustomed to the free camaraderie which existed amongst the other people in the hotel. She felt out of place and unwanted, and she was terribly afraid of William.

After that first evening she avoided him by every means in her power; she dreaded being alone with him and dreaded allowing him to see how impossible she found it to enter into the sports.

At first he gently insisted on taking her out; he spent hours with her on skis trying to help her and give her confidence, but they both knew it was a failure.

Her fear of William was greater than her fear of the snowy slopes and the many tumbles which every beginner has to endure. She felt as if she were back in the old days once more, the days of William's bullying arrogance, when he had laughed at her nervous attempts to entertain him.

Then one evening she overheard a conversation

between Laura and Mrs. Yates which successfully killed the last of her courage.

She was writing in a little room which led from the lounge, and the door was open.

She heard Laura's laugh first, and then her voice.

"Shall we sit here? There's no need to change for half an hour."

There followed sounds of chairs being moved and a long sigh, then Laura's voice again.

"Oh, I am tired! but it's been a perfectly lovely afternoon, hasn't it? And yet, you know, I don't think I'm enjoying myself quite so much as I did last year."

Mrs. Yates's affected voice answered with a little laugh:

"There are too many amateurs, my dear, that's why. They're a nuisance, aren't they? And do tell me—why does Mr. Winter stick to Mrs. Laleham so faithfully?"

Minnie dropped her pen and sat very still. She wanted to move and get up and shut the door, but her limbs felt stiff.

Then Laura said carelessly:

"Oh, they're old friends, so I suppose he feels bound to try and help her, but she'll never be any good at anything out here! She's got no nerve. I wonder she doesn't give it up. I would in her place; she only spoils the sport for everyone else."

"She's got a husband, hasn't she?"

"Yes, but he's in South Africa."

"Oh! You know I thought perhaps Mr. Winter and she——" Mrs. Yates paused suggestively. "No? Don't you think so? Well, perhaps I'm wrong. It was my own idea entirely."

"I'm quite sure he doesn't care anything for her now," Laura said positively, "though I believe years ago, when they were quite children, there was some sort of sweethearting, but nothing serious. Really, I'm rather sorry I brought her. She's a bit of a responsibility. What on earth should we do if she had an accident, broke her leg or something?"

Lionel evidently joined them at that moment and broke into the conversation.

"Where's Mrs. Laleham? I promised to give her a skating lesson. They've lit up the rink."

Laura stifled a yawn as she answered him.

"I believe she's in her room, and anyway it's no use giving her a lesson; she'll never skate."

Lionel protested indignantly.

"Give her a chance! She's only just started. I think she's got on jolly well, considering."

"Oh, Lionel, you shocking liar!" his sister objected.

He answered rather hotly that everyone had to make a start.

"I know," she agreed calmly. "But why monopolise other people all the time, especially anyone

like Mr. Winter, who is so awfully keen! He must be bored to death with her."

Somebody else joined the group, and the conversation was changed, but Minnie sat where she was, staring before her till long after they had all scattered to their various rooms to dress for dinner. He must be bored to death with her! What had he said to Laura that she should think such a thing? Minnie's ultra-sensitiveness shrank and quivered beneath the thought.

She wished passionately that she had not come. She wished she had stayed in Africa with Peter—dear Peter who loved her!

The tears rushed to her eyes. Nobody wanted her here; even Laura had changed, and the old happy friendship between them no longer existed.

William's voice spoke at the open door.

"A penny for your thoughts."

She looked up, startled and troubled.

"They're not worth it; they're not worth anything." She rose and began hurriedly gathering her letters and papers together.

William stood silently watching her, and she broke out again agitatedly, "I must go and dress, I shall be late." She glanced at him. "You've changed already."

"I'm early; there's plenty of time."

He barred the way when she would have passed him.

"Do you object so much to a *tête-à-tête* with me?" he asked hardily.

She tried to laugh.

"You know I don't; you know—oh, please let me go."

He stood aside at once, and Minnie fled across the lounge and upstairs, her face hot and her eyes full of tears.

"I wish I had not come! I wish I had not come!"

She was afraid and did not know why. When she was dressed for dinner she drew up the blind and stood for some moments looking out at the little snow-clad village as it lay peacefully in the moonlight guarded by its sentinel mountains.

A sleigh, dragged by two bell-decked horses, galloped across the hidden road below and disappeared musically in the distance.

It was like a scene from a fairy story, Minnie thought, as she reluctantly turned away and went downstairs.

Laura was talking to William in the hall.

"So that's all fixed up then," she said as Minnie joined them. "We have to start at eight, so Adelbert says. I do hope it will be fine."

William looked at Minnie.

"What will you do all day?" he asked.

She opened her eyes in faint surprise.

"Do you mean to-morrow? Oh, the usual

thing, I suppose—fall about in the snow and get a few more bruises. Why do you ask?"

"Because Adelbert is taking a party out for the day——" He hesitated. "Would you feel competent to come—with me to look after you?"

She flushed and shook her head.

"Oh no, thank you! Oh no!"

"She could never manage it," Laura declared positively. "It would mean somebody waiting for her all the time."

"Minnie knows that I should be only too delighted," William said, but Minnie would not hear of it. "I shall stay here, of course, and stagger about on the ice by myself. Lionel says it's time I went alone."

"Is everyone going to-morrow?" Minnie asked Laura as they sat down to dinner.

"Oh no, only William—and me, and Mrs. Yates and Adelbert."

"Oh, I see."

"I wanted Lionel to come, but he said he would rather stay with you."

Minnie looked angry.

"How absurd! I would much rather he went. I am quite able to look after myself."

"That's what I told him," Laura said calmly. "But he is so obstinate; he would not listen to me."

"I shall tell him myself when he comes down," Minnie declared.

Lionel came in at that moment, apologising for his lateness.

"To tell you the truth, I had a bath!" he said solemnly. "And I had to wait my turn; they were all queuing up on our landing."

"I'm very angry with you," Minnie said. "I hear you've refused to go with the expedition to-morrow."

"I don't want to go. I prefer to stay with you."

"And supposing I won't have you?"

He laughed. "Well, you can't prevent my staying, all the same."

"It's perfectly absurd!" Minnie protested in annoyance.

She spoke to William about it afterwards.

"Do persuade Lionel to go with you to-morrow. I shall be quite all right alone. What can happen to me?"

"Nothing, I sincerely hope, but if he insists——" His brown eyes searched her flushed face. "Minnie, you know that boy is in love with you."

"William, how absurd!"

"It's not absurd! I've felt like punching his head a dozen times since you came."

Her lip quivered, but she said nothing.

"You know it's true," William urged again savagely.

"I might as well say that you are in love with Laura," Minnie said.

He laughed. "Say away! I don't mind."

"You're very friendly, at all events. She calls you by your Christian name."

"Does she?"

"Doesn't she?"

"My dear, don't you know it's bad manners to answer one question by asking another?" William teased her.

"At any rate, you will have an uninterrupted day together to-morrow," Minnie said with dignity, and walked away from him.

William looked after her with a queer expression in his eyes. Was she jealous of Laura? He dared not hope so. He believed that time and separation had killed any romantic affection which Minnie might once have felt for him, or she would not so studiously avoid him at every opportunity. Was she jealous—and of Laura?

There was rather a cruel fighting look in his eyes as he crossed the room to where Laura was sitting.

"Will you dance?" he asked.

He knew that Minnie was watching them, and he kept Laura's hand in his as together they went towards the ballroom.

Chapter XX

THE expedition into the mountains left the following morning before Minnie was up, and she and Lionel breakfasted together downstairs in an almost empty coffee-room.

It was a glorious morning with bright, warm sunshine, and the mountain peaks and wide fields of snow glittered as if myriads of diamonds had fallen upon them.

Lionel and Minnie spent the morning on the ice, and in the afternoon Minnie changed her sports clothes and heavy boots for a short skirt and comfortable shoes, and she and Lionel walked about the little village, finishing up with tea at a café overlooking the curling rink.

Colonel Lawrence was there, wildly excited, his huge feet made larger by the baggy gouties which he wore and his sonorous voice booming through the crisp air like a gong.

"Frightfully keen, isn't he?" Lionel said as he sipped his glass of hot chocolate.

"Yes." Minnie leaned her chin in the cup of her hand. "Lionel, I feel such a pig keeping you down here with me when you might be up there with the others."

She raised her eyes to the great mountains

which frowned down upon them from beyond the village.

"If you knew how much happier I am here with you than I could ever be up there, as you call it, you would not mention it again," he answered seriously. Then as the colour mounted to her cheeks, he added briskly: "Try one of these cakes! They're soaked in rum."

It was getting dark when they walked back to the hotel, and the slight thaw caused by the hot sunshine of the day had frozen, making the footpaths dangerously slippery.

"Take my arm," Lionel said, and without waiting for a reply he tucked her hand cosily under his arm.

"Wonder what Peter's doing now?" he said abruptly.

Minnie started. "Peter!" she spoke his name vaguely, almost as if it was the name of somebody she had known long ago and forgotten.

"I wish he were out here with us," she said hurriedly.

"So do I." But Lionel's voice was not quite sincere.

They had dinner together, and afterwards he taught her a new patience, resisting all attempts on the part of the Manchester Minx to drag him off to a moonlight carnival on the ice, and when she had at last departed with her nose in the air Minnie looked at him with grateful eyes.

"Lionel, you are a dear!" she said softly.

He coloured in embarrassed pleasure, and she went on:

"I don't know why you are so good to me. I've done nothing to deserve it."

Lionel laid the knave of hearts beside the queen before he answered.

"I'll tell you why if you'd like to know." But Minnie stopped him.

"No—please. Let's go on with the game."

When she went to bed at ten o'clock the mountain party had not returned.

"Do you think they are all right?" she asked Lionel anxiously, as he bade her good-night.

"Right as rain!" he answered cheerily. "We were often out as late as this last year."

Minnie laid awake for a long time straining her ears through the silence to catch the sound of returning footsteps or voices along the village street, but she heard nothing save once the distant roar of an avalanche as it slipped from the summit of some mountain into the depths of a crevasse, and she trembled as she listened, wondering if William was safe.

In the morning when Christine brought her hot water she also brought the news that the party was still absent.

Minnie sat up in bed, fear dilating her eyes.

"You mean—they have not come back all night?"

Christine nodded, her red lips pursed up expressively.

But with Adelbert, she protested, they were so safe! Heaven above! words could not express the certainty of their safety. Adelbert was to the mountains born. He would not permit that any harm should come to the friends of madam.

Minnie dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. Madame Ober, who kept the hotel, took the non-appearance of her guests quite calmly. They were safe, of course, they were safe, she said. Adelbert knew his business, and if he thought it better to stay away all night, stay away all night they would. There were travellers' shelters in the mountains where one always found food and where one could stay the night in warmth and safety. No, there was no need for alarm!

"And Mees Sylvester!" she added, "she is so cool! So sure! One could feel no anxiety about her. She is as safe as a man."

But it was of William that Minnie was thinking: William to whom she had not been quite kind last night; William whom she might never see again.

She put on her cap and coat and wandered out into the village. There was no sunshine to-day, and the mountain tops were hidden in thick mist.

What was it like up there? she wondered. What was happening? She walked about all the morning looking vaguely into the windows of the

little shops filled with carved animals and dried bunches of edelweiss, and cuckoo clocks and musical boxes, her thoughts always with William. Supposing he never came back! Supposing she never saw him any more! As she turned homewards for lunch old Stamford overtook her.

"Not on the ice this morning," he said reproachfully. "You do not take advantage of your opportunities, my dear."

Minnie smiled ruefully. "I'm tired! I'm afraid I shall never be any good at skating or any other sport."

"I will take you out and give you a lesson on skis after lunch," he said, "I will take you to a field of untrodden snow where we shall be quite alone. You will like that?"

But Minnie excused herself, her head ached, she declared, and she had letters to write. She could eat no lunch, and afterwards she went up to her room and lay down on the bed.

She closed her eyes, but sleep would not come, and against the darkness of her lids she saw nothing but the cruel high peaks of the mountains, stern and unconquerable.

God! Oh, God, what had happened?

She heard Christine's voice calling out in the passage and her running steps and knock at the door.

She started up, white and terrified.

"Yes, yes, oh, what is it?"

Christine was all smiles.

They had come back, it appeared. Adelbert and the lady friend of madam, they were quite safe and sound.

"And—Mr. Winter?" Minnie asked with trembling lips.

Christine spread her hands. "Oh, but surely, Monsieur Winter, he was there also. Quite safe. Did madam wish to speak with him?"

"I'll go down," Minnie said.

She met Laura on the stairs, a very rosy, smiling Laura, with sparkling eyes and snow on her hair and coat.

"A perfectly glorious time," she said enthusiastically. "We slept at the Hunters' Lodge last night. Such an experience! There was a thick mist like a carpet below us, and Adelbert did not think it was wise to try the descent. You all right?" she asked lightly.

"Yes, thank you. Aren't you very tired?"

"Not a bit. I'd love to go again to-morrow."

She went on to her room, and Minnie went downstairs, but she saw nothing of William.

"So they're all serene," Lionel said cheerily, coming to meet her. "I'm sure you thought we should never see them again, didn't you?"

Minnie answered rather sharply that she had not thought about it at all, then repented, and slipped a hand through his arm.

"I'm sorry. I'm cross. Come out for a walk with me."

He went gladly enough. He would have sacrificed anything for an hour alone with Minnie. She talked and laughed brightly enough now. It was a great relief to be free of anxiety. An hour ago she felt that the only thing she wanted in life was to see William; but now she knew he was safe her old fear of him returned. She kept Lionel walking about the little village for as long as possible, dreading to go back to the hotel. It was quite dark when at last they retracted their steps, but from behind the mountains the first pale glint of moonlight was gradually rising, touching the sky with opal fingers. The air was frosty and keen, and the snow crunched crisply beneath their feet.

The Manchester Minx called a cheery "Hullo!" to them as she was dragged past on a luge by a new admirer.

She was dressed in a golden brown woollen suit, and looked like a little pixie from the mountains with her smiling, impudent face and rosy cheeks.

Minnie sighed as she looked after her.

"I wish I was young again!" she said involuntarily.

Lionel laughed.

"Young again? How old are you, pray?"

"Old enough to realise that I am no longer young."

He screwed up his face.

"That sounds clever! I shall look for that in the pages of your next book."

They both laughed, then she said, suddenly grave: "Do you know, Lionel, I've got a presentiment that I shall never write another book?"

He cried out indignantly.

"What rot! It's the moonlight that's making you sad."

She shook her head.

"It isn't. I love the moonlight. If it wasn't so cold I should like to sit in the snow and watch it on those mountains for the rest of my life."

"I'm content to risk it, if you will," he told her.

He refused to be serious, and he succeeded in making her laugh before they got back to the hotel.

"That's better," he said, as he brushed the snow from her boots and gaiters in the hotel porch. "I don't like you to be sad. It makes me sad too."

She rested a hand on his shoulder for a moment.

"You're a dear," she said warmly.

"You're an angel, and I love you," said Lionel.

Her eyes clouded.

"You mustn't say that."

"I know I mustn't," he answered humbly. "But it's true, all the same."

Minnie went up to dress. Christine met her on the landing. *"Haben sie Monsieur Winter, gefunden?"* she asked in German. Then she laughed and corrected herself. "Mr. Winter—has madam seen? He was here—he ask for you?"

Minnie shook her head.

"No, I've been out. Get me some hot water quickly, Christine, or I shall be late."

As she was going down to dinner she ran into William on the stairs.

"I looked for you an hour ago to tell you we were all right, but you had gone out," he said. "I suppose you were not interested."

She avoided his eyes and his question. "I hear you have had a wonderful time," she said lightly.

"Yes, you ought to have been with us. The view from the top this morning was wonderful. Have you ever seen a sunrise?"

"Yes, once. From the boat going out to South Africa."

"But you've never seen it over the mountains?"

"No."

"I should like you to. It's magnificent."

"I am sure it is."

"But you are content to take my word for it, is that it?"

She smiled.

"Well, I think it would be kinder to you than expecting you to drag me up to—wherever you were yesterday."

He looked at her steadily.

"You never *used* to be deliberately unkind," he said.

Minnie turned her face away.

"William, don't be absurd."

They went in to dinner together and found Laura already seated at the table. She flung William a laughing glance as he passed on to his own seat.

"We were not as comfortable as this last night!"

"We were not indeed," he answered.

Laura turned to Minnie.

"I was so frightfully cold that they dosed me with brandy, and then we all had to huddle together to keep warm. I woke up this morning and found that I had been lying with my head on Mr. Winter's shoulder."

"Did you?"

Minnie's voice was very quiet. But she was realising with a sense of frightened shame that she was beginning to hate Laura, whom she had once loved.

Chapter XXI

THERE was a letter from Peter the following afternoon which had been forwarded from London.

It was typical of him—boyish, cheery, and interspersed with grumbles and shy expressions of love for his wife.

He began "My own darling," and went on to say how much he missed her, how he hated the house without her, and that he did not stay in it five minutes if he could avoid doing so.

He said that there had already been moments when he had very nearly thrown everything up and followed her to England; he most certainly would have done so but for the wonderful scheme which he and Ronald were evolving.

"Things are shaping beautifully" (he wrote), "and something great may happen any day now. I shall send you a cable when it does. . . . Take care of yourself and have a good time, but don't forget me. I have kept my promise to you faithfully, so you need have no anxiety on my account. I am longing for a letter from you telling me all the news. It seems strange that I don't even know where you are, or whom you are with. Tell me everything you do and whom you meet. I wonder if you will see anything of that fellow Winter? I never quite liked him, you know, though I've no reason for disliking him. Perhaps I was jealous of him—in fact, I know I

was, and you know it too. You see, there were so many years of your life when he knew you and I did not. . . . You have been gone a week now, and it seems like a year. You might bring me back some socks when you come—the thin grey ones like those I always wore, but you know. Bring some new records for the gramophone, too, if you think of it; but nothing really matters so long as you bring yourself to your ever devoted

"PETER."

Minnie sat lost in thought for a long time when she had read Peter's letter. It seemed to carry with it a breath of the hot African air and a glimpse of the ugly, sandy country.

So Peter missed her and wanted her back. The knowledge sent a warm glow to her heart. She read his letter all through again, down to the part where he spoke of William.

Why had he done that, she wondered? His name had never been mentioned between them since they left England. It almost seemed as if he must have had some presentiment—almost as if he *knew!*

Knew! Knew what? What was there to know? She meant to tell him everything when she wrote, of course, and after all there was nothing to tell except that she had come to Switzerland and that William had happened to be there too. . . .

But she was deceiving herself, and she knew it.

Why could she not tell Peter the truth—that she had only come to Switzerland because William

was there, and that he filled her thoughts night and day to the exclusion of everything else.

"I'm wicked! Wicked!" she thought, but even that knowledge seemed of small importance compared with the fact that half an hour ago she had seen William and Laura leave the hotel together carrying their skates. William never offered to help her now! Never urged her to enter into any of the sports; never asked her to dance!

He spent most of his time with Laura, and there was a new little air of importance and triumph in Laura's eyes.

"If I had not come home I dare say he would have married her," was the thought with which Minnie tortured herself. "I dare say he will marry her still when I have gone back."

And she thought of the long sea voyage and the hot airless atmosphere of South Africa, and shuddered.

At teatime William and Laura had not returned; the Manchester Minx sauntered up to Minnie as she sat having her solitary tea in the lounge.

"Hullo! All alone?" she asked in her free and easy way. She perched herself on the arm of a chair, her hands stuck into her breeches pockets boyish fashion. "Why don't you go out more?" she demanded. "Mr. Winter and Miss Sylvester are having the time of their lives on the ice."

"I'm very glad to hear it," Minnie said with

an effort. "Are they coming in to tea, do you know?"

The Minx shook her bobbed head.

"Should say not. They were making tracks for the café when I came away."

"Oh!" Minnie put down her cup with a little chill feeling.

William had never once taken her out to tea; the old terrible feeling of being crowded out of his life came back to her.

Always it had been the same! Always she had had to stand aside to give place to some other woman.

How could he love her when he treated her so? And yet, in fairness to him, she asked herself what else could he do when she so determinedly avoided him.

The Manchester Minx broke in upon her unhappy thoughts. "I say, are they engaged?" she enquired interestedly.

"Engaged!" Minnie raised startled eyes.

The Minx nodded.

"I only ask you because I've got a bet on with Jerry. He says that Mr. Winter doesn't care two boots about Miss Sylvester and I say he does! If he didn't why on earth does he waste his time with her? So we've got a bet! He bet me a new pair of skates against a woolly sweater in Esterhey's window that they've got it all fixed up. I knew you'd be sure to know."

Minnie forced a smile.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't tell you."

The Minx looked disappointed.

"Can't you really? Or *won't* you?" she asked.

"I really can't."

The Minx strolled away disconsolately, and Minnie sat staring before her with hard eyes.

William belonged to her! How dared Laura try to take him. She hated her! She hated them both!

"A penny for your thoughts, Mrs. Laleham," said old Stamford, dropping into a chair beside her. "And why are you all alone?"

Foolish tears swam into Minnie's eyes. She liked the old man, and he was always kind to her. Before she had realised it she was pouring out her trouble to him.

"I was wishing I hadn't come! Oh, Mr. Stamford, I wish I hadn't. I'm so out of it! I know it's my own fault. But I can't do things like all the other women can. I suppose I'm a coward, but I just *can't* do them! And they laugh at me, I know they do. Not that I blame them exactly—perhaps I should laugh myself if the situation was reversed, but as it is . . ."

She broke off, biting her lip to hide its trembling.

Old Stamford did not answer for a moment, then he said gently, "You know that all sounds to me rather like a storm in a teacup. I've heard

Winter offer to take you out with him scores of times, and you always refuse!" His eyes twinkled. "I've even offered myself. Of course, I know I'm an old man, but all the same . . ."

"You've always been most kind."

"But you don't avail yourself of my kindness," he chided her gently. "How can you expect to get on with the sports? There's no reason why you should not be as good on skis or skates as the rest of us."

"I've never played games. I'm no good at games at all," she protested. "Besides, I hate being a nuisance to other people—people who can all do the things at which I'm so stupid."

"We were all a nuisance to other people when we started."

She smiled at him with wet eyes.

"I suppose you think I'm silly—and too sensitive?"

He touched her hand as it lay on the arm of her chair between them.

"I think you are a very sweet and charming lady," he said with old-fashioned gallantry. "But a little too unselfish—if it is possible to be too unselfish. You must consider yourself more." He drew a little closer to her. "Now promise me that next time Winter offers to give you a lesson you will go."

She laughed ruefully. "He won't offer again —he's tired of offering."

"Very well, then, you must put that nasty little pride of yours in your pocket and ask him."

She drew back.

"Oh, but I couldn't. Supposing he refused?"

"He won't do that, my dear lady," said old Stamford quietly. She looked at him with swift suspicion, but he seemed quite innocent of any deeper meaning. "May I smoke a pipe?" he asked.

"Please do."

William was not mentioned again, but Minnie felt decidedly cheered.

Did old Stamford think that William liked her? she was shy of the word "loved," even in her thoughts. It almost sounded from what he had said as if he might think so?

Minnie put on her prettiest frock that evening and took extra pains with her hair. Laura, coming into her room to borrow something, opened her eyes wide.

"Goodness! how smart we are to-night."

Minnie met her eyes defiantly.

"Well, why not? It's no use having clothes if you don't wear them."

Laura shrugged her shoulders and walked out of the room without answering.

Minnie clenched her hands, an angry spot of colour in her pale cheeks.

"I hate her! I hate her!" she told herself fiercely.

She had not imagined herself capable of such passionate anger; it frightened her, even while it gave her courage.

She went downstairs with her head held high and her eyes bright and resolute.

There were several people already in the lounge. Mrs. Yates, in a new creation of silver and black velvet, was, as usual, holding a little court of men, of whom William was one.

She raised her lorgnette and peered through them at Minnie as she came towards them.

"Heavens! how elegant we are!" she ejaculated. She took hold of Minnie's arm and playfully turned her round, scrutinising her frock.

"Charming! Perfectly charming!" she said. "Why haven't you worn it before?"

Minnie laughed and flushed.

"I don't know why. I'm glad you like it."

"You look years younger," Mrs. Yates declared. "Positively years younger."

Minnie looked appealingly at William, but his eyes were unsmiling, and her heart sank. Didn't he like her new frock? She grasped her newly found courage with both hands. When presently he moved away from the little group she followed him.

"William!"

He turned at once.

Minnie's courage began to die.

"I want—I mean—I want to speak to you."

He looked at her with a faintly whimsical smile in his eyes.

"Something very private?" he asked mockingly.

She met his eyes bravely. "Yes—at least——"

"There's nobody in the writing-room."

She followed him, her heart beating fast, and he closed the door.

"And now I'm all attention," he said. "What have you been doing? Have you pushed somebody off a mountain, or buried them in the snow, or what is it you have to confess?"

"Nothing like that. Don't laugh at me. It's only—I should like to go out with you to-morrow, if you'll take me."

She saw the colour beat slowly into his face.

"To-morrow. . . ."

"Yes." She fingered the soft folds of her frock with nervous fingers. "I should really like to be able to ski and skate and do all the things everyone else does. . . . I suppose I've been silly not to try harder, but—but I will now if you'll help me."

"I shall be only too glad. I've offered before, haven't I?" But his voice sounded perfunctory.

Minnie gave him a wavering smile.

"Well, to-morrow, then?" she said.

"To-morrow, I'm afraid I can't—I've promised Miss Sylvester—but any other day . . . ."

There was a deathly silence. Minnie felt her body turn cold as she stood there.

Laura again! Always Laura!

For a moment she could not trust her voice to speak; then she found herself at the door trying to open it, and William was holding the handle against her.

"Let me go!"

"Minnie!"

She struck at his hand with impotent fingers. "Let me go!"

"Wait a moment, listen to me! Minnie!"

He caught her arms, holding them fast in spite of her ineffectual struggles.

"Let me go! Let me go! I hate you! I hate you both!"

"Minnie! For God's sake. . . ."

She raised her passionate eyes to his face. Her lips shook so that she could hardly speak.

"I wish I'd never come here! I hate you! I wish I'd never seen you! All my life you've hurt me—all my life! And now it's Laura, and she used to be my friend—she pretended to be my friend. Let me go!"

Passion, long pent up, had broken through at last. She hardly knew what she was saying and would not have cared had she known. For the moment she was mad with jealousy and her own despair. She had lost William, whom she had loved all her life; he had been stolen from her by

a woman whom she had believed to be her friend. She hated them both! She wished she could die.

Great, tearless sobs shook her from head to foot as she stood there in the grasp of his hands.

"Minnie!" said William hoarsely, and she looked up.

For a moment they stood silent, each held by the other's gaze, each reading in the other's eyes the many sweet, hopeless things which should have been spoken years before or not at all.

And Minnie's dreadful trembling suddenly ceased; the passionate anger died from her eyes, and she grew very white.

At that moment she looked more like the little girl of twenty years ago who had passionately called William a "swanker" than the woman who had done her loyal best to withstand the tide what had been mercilessly sweeping her to and fro for so long.

And the room grew suddenly dark before her, and she would have fallen but for William's upholding hands as her white lips whispered their pitiful confession at last.

"Oh, you belonged to me first!"

"Minnie!"

She fell forward into the arms he held out to her, and for the first time since they were boy and girl together William bent his head and found her lips.

It was a strange kiss, carrying with it as it did

so many sweet and bitter memories; so much regret and longing, so much hopelessness and despair, and, above all, a false sense of happiness and security. Then William said:

"You will be the last—as you were the first. All the rest are as nothing. I love you! I love you!"

She tried to answer, but could find no words, and then as the shrill voice of the Manchester Minx sounded outside William kissed her again, a kiss of passionate tenderness, and put her from him.

He went out of the room, shutting the door behind him, and successfully prevented the Minx from entering by dragging her forcibly away.

Minnie stood with her face hidden in her hands. She was shaken with happiness, and yet she felt ashamed to her very soul. With the touch of William's lips still burning hers she could only think of Peter, whom for one mad moment she had forgotten. Peter miles away in the ugly heat of Africa, missing her, longing for her, loving her!

The dinner gong boomed through the hotel, and with a desperate effort she recovered herself, but she felt that everyone must know what had happened—as if her secret was written all over her in letters of fire.

Laura's critical eyes were quick to perceive her agitation.

"What's the matter?" she asked as Minnie took her seat at the table. "You look—frightened!"

Minnie flushed in agitation.

"Frightened! Why, how absurd!"

William came down the room at that moment, and she cast a swift, terrified glance at him.

But to the unobservant he looked the same as usual. He even paused for a moment at their table and spoke to Laura.

"Not too tired after your strenuous afternoon, I hope?"

Laura shook her head.

"Am I ever tired? What about this evening? I hear they are to light up the skating rink after all?"

"Is that so?" William was politely interested. "I'm afraid I shall not be able to go."

A swift vexation crossed Laura's face.

"Bridge?" she asked.

"No. . . ." Minnie could feel his eyes rest upon her for a moment, though she never raised her own. "I'm going to show Minnie the village by moonlight."

"Minnie!" Surprise and displeasure were obvious in Laura's voice. "Why, she'll be frozen. She hates the cold!" she protested.

"She'll be all right," William said confidently. "Will you be ready at half-past eight, Minnie?"

"Yes."

"What on earth do you want to arrange such silly things for?" Laura asked irritably when he had gone. "You've seen the village by moonlight at least a dozen times since we came."

Minnie raised her eyes with forced calmness.

"I didn't arrange it. William asked me to go."

Lionel struck into the conversation with mild sarcasm.

"Well, you've had a good share of his society lately, Laura."

"I get little enough of yours, at any rate," she retorted sharply.

She was very silent during dinner. She hardly answered Minnie's half-hearted attempts at conversation. She left the table before the other two had finished and walked offendedly away.

Lionel looked at Minnie with comical eyes.

"Jealous!" he said significantly.

Minnie flushed. She remembered how jealous she herself had been—only an hour ago, was it? And she thrilled to the memory of William's kiss that had so easily killed her jealousy.

She found him waiting for her in the hall.

"Put on your snow boots and wrap up well," he said. He was wearing a thick coat himself, with a high storm collar.

Minnie went to her room and dressed with shaking hands.

She felt as she had done that night years ago when she had dressed to go up to town with

William, and Peter had come in and prevented her from going.

Supposing something happened to prevent her again!

One moment she wished passionately that it might, and the next she felt that she could kill anyone who tried to rob her of just this one night. At the foot of the stairs she found old Stamford talking to William, and she thought there was a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at her.

"What it is to be young, Mrs. Laleham!" he said with a mock sigh, and then, "Take care of her, Winter," he added.

"I shall do my best," William said.

They went out into the moonlit world.

There was a great hush everywhere, and the lights from the little châlets high up on the mountain side twinkled through the clear air like watching eyes.

"It's impossible to talk undisturbed in the hotel," William said suddenly. "But you need not be afraid I'm going to keep you walking about in the snow for hours. There's a little spot I've wanted to show you ever since you came. It's only ten minutes away."

"I'm not tired," Minnie said. Tired! She had never felt so young or wide awake in her life.

William looked down at her.

"Give me your hand," he said abruptly; then

as she hesitated he found it for himself and kissed it before he drew it through his arm.

"You belong to me to-night, at any rate!" he said.

They went on for some way in silence after that. Through the village, past the little old church, where someone was playing the organ, and along a narrow winding path that led upwards till the roofs of the shops and picturesque châlets were far beneath them.

"Where are we going?" Minnie asked rather breathlessly.

"It's a little farm place," William told her. He stood still for a moment. "Want a rest?" he asked. He looked round. "I'm afraid there is no convenient farm barrow anywhere about to-night, my dear."

Minnie laughed tremulously. "Do you still remember that? And it's so long ago."

"I remember everything that happened when you were with me."

They went on again, and the path grew narrower and steeper till it seemed to end in a queer, broken-down gate, from which the deep snow had been dug away.

Minnie raised her head.

"William, what a lovely scent! It's like—it's almost like the fields in summer time or wild flowers."

"That's why I've brought you here. It's hay

you can smell; it's all packed under this little châlet place for the cattle during the winter, and it's last year's clover and the flowers amongst it that you can smell. The warmth brings out the scent." He let her hand go for a moment while he pushed open the gate. "It's like the happy memories of the days when we were young," he said. "They can never lose their sweetness."

She made no answer, but she followed close behind him as he turned a little to the left and pushed open a low door leading to the lower part of the châlet.

The scent of wild flowers was stronger here; but for the snow outside it might have been an August night in the fields at home, Minnie thought, as she looked round her with wondering eyes.

The moonlight streamed into the queer, low-ceilinged storehouse and at the far end revealed two satin-coated little calves snugly cuddled into some loose hay, their eyes bright with enquiry turned upon the intruders.

"Oh, the darlings!" Minnie said with a catch in her voice.

She knelt down beside them and stroked their heads and let them lick her hand.

William stood silently by. The moonlight made it as light as day, and it was as still as if they had wandered into a city of the dead until

down in the village below them the church bell slowly chimed the hour.

Nine o'clock!

William moved. He stooped and pulled Minnie to her feet and into his arms.

"How much longer must I wait? All these years I've hungered so to kiss you. . . ."

She gave a little cry of protest, then suddenly yielded to him.

"I love you—I've always loved you."

"My dear! My dear!"

She put her arms round his neck and hid her face against his shoulder, and he felt her tremble as he held her.

"Minnie, you're not afraid of me? I wouldn't hurt a hair of your precious head."

"I'm not afraid of you—I'm afraid of myself —and of life. I ought not to have come out here at all; but I wanted to so much!"

"You wanted to come to me?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Oh, my darling!"

She flung her head back, looking into his eyes.

"I don't know why you should love me," she said tremulously. "You've known so many women, and I'm so plain!"

He laughed with deep emotion.

"My dear, do you think I know whether you're plain or pretty? Do you think I care? I love

you as you are; I love your eyes because they are yours, and your hair because it's part of you."

"You used to say it was the untidiest hair you had ever seen."

He pushed back the little woolly cap she wore and kissed her hair.

"Did I? That's why I love it, then."

He kissed her lips and her eyes and her throat till she pushed him gently away resisting.

He laughed tenderly.

"Are you shy with me after all these years?"

"You've never kissed me like that before," she whispered.

"No." His face grew moody. "What a fool I've been, Minnie, to think I might have had you always for my own!"

She had no answer to give, and suddenly he took his arms away from her and walked to the open door, looking out at the moonlight.

She watched him with timid eyes.

Presently she followed and slipped a hand into his. "What are you thinking about?"

His fingers closed round hers.

"I am wishing I could be a greater villain than I am," he said roughly.

"What do you mean?"

He turned and looked at her with hot eyes.

"I am wishing that I loved you less so that I could be brute enough to take you away whether

you wished to come or not and keep you to myself for the rest of your life!"

He laughed mirthlessly as she drew back from him.

"That frightens you! I thought it would, and yet—what do you think we are going to do, Minnie. Are you going to walk out of my life again when you leave Switzerland for God alone knows how many more years and expect me to wait patiently for you, longing for you as I do, and . . ." he broke off roughly.

Minnie tried to speak, but her voice seemed to have gone, and he went on.

"If you hadn't let me know you cared it would have been different, but now . . ." His eyes seemed to burn her. "How long have you loved me, Minnie? Not as long as I've loved you, I know, but—tell me how long!"

"You'll be so conceited," she whispered with quivering lips.

"I'm the humblest man on earth where you are concerned, my dear," he answered.

She told him ashamedly, yet with pride. "I've loved you—always, ever since we first met."

He gave a sharp exclamation of pain.

"So long! If I'd only guessed!"

"It would have made no difference if you had," she said with unconscious reproach. "I think—I am sure, William, that you were not ready for me—all those years ago."

"I was an arrogant fool! I never deserved to have you. Fate knew that."

His voice was so full of pain that she raised her head for the first time of her own accord.

And William gave a little rough sound which was half a sob, and his arms went round her like a vise, holding her as if they could never let her go, while for a moment he put his head down on her shoulder as if he were an unhappy boy instead of a man with more than his man's share of wild oats behind him.

"If only we could have things over again!" he said. "If only we could have things over again!"

They sat down on a little rough trestle seat against one of the wooden walls, holding hands and talking in whispers of the past, of the hundred and one little memories which they shared, and of their disappointments and pleasures and tears.

And William told her of his wife, and what had happened—not blaming her.

"She was never anything to me. It was my fault things turned out so badly," he said. "She was a dear woman in many ways. I hope she is happier now."

And Minnie told him of her marriage, and of Peter's love for her and of his goodness to her, of the little son who had died, and of how she came to write her first book.

But they both avoided speaking of the future

because they were afraid, till suddenly William said: "And after to-night, Minnie? What then?"

Her hand shook in his.

"After to-night—can't we be happy and—and content, because we've had to-night?"

He looked at her, and a quick flame leapt into his eyes.

"You mean that there is nothing more for me? You mean that you will go away and that this is to be the end?"

"Not the end—don't say that," she said quickly. "We can always be friends. Can't we always be friends? Friendship is a good thing if we can have nothing else, William."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"Friendship! What does that mean? That you will write to me sometimes, I suppose—perhaps three times a year—and I shall write to you stupid, senseless letters that will not dare to say or mean anything. And you will go back to South Africa and Laleham."

He tore his hand from hers. "You're asking too much. I can't do it. If you love me——"

"I do love you," she said.

He went on doggedly:

"Then it must be all or nothing. Do you think I'm made of stone? You came out here knowing that I loved you—that you were the only woman in the world for me. Do you think that now I've held you in my arms and kissed you I can stand

back quietly and say good-bye as if it didn't matter? Do you think I can let you go, not knowing when I shall see you again? I cannot, I tell you, I cannot!"

He rose and began pacing the distance between where she sat and the open doorway.

Presently he came back.

"Come away with me, my dear," he said quietly and very humbly. "I love you and you love me, and life slips away so fast. What wrong can there be in our wanting just a few years of happiness together? We're no longer very young, either of us. Don't you think that all these years will have paid enough for the next little while?"

Minnie sat very still, her eyes fixed on the moonlit mountains outside; then she said slowly:

"William, I've got Peter! It's different for you—you've nobody. It doesn't matter to anyone what you do, but it would break Peter's heart."

He cried out roughly.

"Then why did you let me kiss you? Why did you say you loved me, if he is to be considered first?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"It was wicked of me, I know it was wicked," she whispered, "but I could not help it."

He went on his knees beside her, drawing her hands down from her face.

"Listen, my dear," he said gently. "I'm not trying to force you against your conscience; at

least—oh, God help me! what is the use of saying that?" he broke out with renewed passion. "I *am* trying to force you! I want you! I should like to kill your conscience and all your honesty, which I love, and make you forget everything except how happy you would be in my arms."

Yes, she knew well enough that she would be happy, and yet she listened to his voice as if it was in a dream that she heard it, fully realising its sweetness and dearness, and yet feeling that it was not for her that those words were spoken; that she must not listen to them.

"If it's that you don't trust me——" William broke out.

She put up her hand.

"Don't! oh, don't say that!"

"If it's that you don't care for me enough——"

She answered with a little pitying smile.

"Then why is it, why?" he urged.

"Because I can't," she said, "I can't."

"You think it would be wrong?"

"I know it would."

"You did not think it wrong to let me kiss you and hold you in my arms just now. My arms are round you still, but you don't tell me to take them away."

She gave a little convulsive sob; she knew her own weakness well enough now that she had found her heaven in his arms and her first real happiness in his kiss.

But there was Peter.

Down in the village the bell struck the hour again. Ten o'clock!

"They will be wondering where we are," Minnie said painfully. She rose to her feet.

"Let us go back now, William."

His face was white in the moonlight.

"It is to be good-bye, then?"

She cried out, clinging to him.

"I don't know! I don't know!"

He knew pitifully just how weak she was in her love for him; knew triumphantly his own strength.

Experience told him that she was a woman to be taken by force or to be left for ever. All through life he had had his own way with women, but the fact that he loved Minnie with every beat of his heart, whereas he had never loved those others, made him more patient and generous.

"Listen, my darling," he said. "You know as well as I do that we cannot go on like this. It must either be good-bye—and I mean good-bye—or—I keep you. Anyway, I meant to leave here at the end of the week. I could not have gone on seeing you every day, wanting you." He laughed roughly. "I don't know if it's been heaven or hell for me since you came. I'm going out to-morrow all day, as we did before, with Adelbert. You don't mind?" he asked swiftly as she looked up.

"No," Minnie shook her head, "but you'll come

back to-morrow night, promise me? Oh, William! it was dreadful before. I thought something had happened; I thought you were killed——"

He raised her hand to his lips.

"It will take a great deal to kill me while there is still a chance of having you. I will be back to-morrow night, I promise you, and then you will give me your answer. You will have all day to think it over. You must tell me when I come home. If you—if you decide to take me, worthless beggar as I am, I swear to God, or whatever being looks on while we make wreckage of our lives, that I will love you and take care of you and adore you to my dying day, and after—if there is a hereafter," he added with a flash of his old cynicism. "But if you—send me away——"

He tried to smile, but it was a poor failure, and she felt his lips tremble as he silently kissed her.

And presently they went out into the moonlight and down the little steep path again hand in hand.

Now and then the silence was broken by the distant barking of a dog, or the tinkle of sleigh-bells in the village street below. Neither of them spoke till they were near the hotel, then Minnie broke out tremulously:

"William—you'll never—never think badly of me for—for letting you know I—cared, will you?"

"Oh, my darling! why should I? Look!" He went down on one knee in the snow, and with his head bared to the keen air and the moonlight kissed the hem of the new frock which she had put on so that she might look pretty for him.

"I love you, but more than that, I adore you. To me you are, and always will be, the best and sweetest woman in the world," said William, with a new deep reverence in his voice. He looked up at her again, and Minnie bent and kissed his forehead.

Then they went back to the hotel in silence, walking a pace apart.

Chapter XXII

MINNIE was down early the following morning to see Adelbert and his party off for their trip into the mountains.

It was a lovely morning, crisp and sunny, without a cloud in the sky, as they all gathered outside the hotel.

The Manchester Minx was rushing about excitedly demanding who had appropriated her gloves.

"Bright yellow ones!" she screamed, dashing into the lounge. "Someone must have bagged them."

Mrs. Yates was smoking the inevitable cigarette as she waited for Adelbert to give the word to start.

"Such a pity you can't come, Mrs. Laleham," she said to Minnie. "You really ought to make an effort to conquer your fear. I was just the same myself once, and I got over it all right."

"I don't think Minnie will ever get over it," Laura said unkindly. She was struggling with the strap of her ski, and when William came along she called to him:

"Oh, Mr. Winter, please be a Christian!"

William went down on one knee in the snow

and fastened the strap easily. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he looked at Minnie.

Adelbert came from the hotel.

"Everyone ready?" he asked.

He was a slim, attractive figure in his dark, tight-fitting coat and breeches, his head bare, and and a picturesque muffler of many tangerine shades about his throat.

William went to Minnie.

"To-night, then," he said.

"Yes." There were tears in her eyes though she smiled.

He held her hand for a moment, then turned and sped away in the wake of the others.

Minnie went back into the hotel alone. She had insisted that Lionel join the trip to-day, and had turned a deaf ear on his entreaties to be allowed to stay with her.

She fetched her cap and gloves and went down to the village.

William had given her one short day in which to make up her mind to the greatest question of her life.

It was strange how little it troubled her, and yet she had no idea how she meant to decide.

"It will all come right. I know it will all come right," was the conviction in her mind; but in what way she did not know.

She went into one of the shops and sent some

picture cards to Peter and one to his mother in France.

Then she went on up the winding street to the little church.

There was a service going on, and scraping the snow from her boots she slipped quietly through the door.

The congregation was small, and chiefly composed of peasant women in shawls and picturesque earrings, who did not move or turn a head as Minnie entered.

She knelt down on the hard wooden bench in the back pew and listened dreamily to the deep voice of the priest chanting some prayers.

She could not understand a word that he said, but she found the monotonous incantation was strangely soothing.

There were many candles on the high altar, and a draught from somewhere had made a large winding-sheet in one of them, and Minnie's thoughts went back to that night—more than twenty years ago—when she had leaned out of the window of the seaside lodgings in her pink flannel nightgown to talk to the boy William.

There had been a winding-sheet in the candle then, and he had drawn her attention to it as he bade her be careful not to singe her hair in the flame.

More than twenty years ago. . . .

She dragged her thoughts back with an effort to the present and the voice of the priest.

A man kneeling in the aisle just in front of her crossed himself and muttered something in a deep, gruff voice, and at the same moment a little lump of ice which had melted in the warmth of the church fell from the heel of his boot with a little plop!

The sunshine streamed through a gaily coloured stained-glass window and glinted off the steel comb which a young girl wore in her smoothly braided hair.

Then the organ began to play, and everyone rose and streamed out into the snowy world again.

Minnie stayed behind for a moment.

She said a prayer for Peter with the old childish wording.

". . . God bless dear Peter, and William . . ." Something seemed to catch her by the throat there, and for a moment she closed her eyes, then she went on: "And make me a good girl, for Christ's sake. . . . Amen."

There were tears in her eyes when she rose from her knees, but she brushed them away, and she felt quite happy as she walked down the frozen, slippery path and found old Stamford waiting for her at the gate.

"I saw you go in, so ventured to wait," he said,

as she joined him. "What made you go to church, Mrs. Laleham?"

She smiled. "I don't know. It was because I heard the music, I think."

"They have a very fine organ," he answered.

They walked together down the village street.

"So all our friends have trekked off with Adelbert," she said.

"Yes." Minnie glanced up at the mountain peaks which towered above the village. "I hope he will look after them and bring them safely back."

"Which reminds me," old Stamford said with a little smile, "that friend Winter charged me to look after you."

A sweet flush coloured her cheeks.

"Did he?"

"He did, indeed. You are very old friends, I understand."

"I have known him all my life."

"Then that is not so very long," he insisted gallantly.

Minnie laughed. "Are you trying to find out how old I am?"

"On the contrary, I am trying to tell you that I know how young you are."

"And after that," Minnie said, "out of sheer gratitude I place myself unreservedly in your hands for the rest of the day."

Old Stamford bowed with old-fashioned courtesy.

"May the day never end!"

They walked on, laughing and chatting; and up on the mountain heights William was looking down on the sunlit village and thinking of Minnie.

Chapter XXIII

IT was late when William Winter and his party came back from their expedition that night.

Winter was tired and dispirited, and the day had not been nearly the success Adelbert had anticipated.

The Manchester Minx had broken one of her skis and had been forced to struggle home without them, grumbling and complaining all the way, her pretty face pretty no longer in its fretful petulance.

Mrs. Yates laughed unkindly when William insisted on stopping behind to give the Minx a hand.

"I did not know you were so keen on lame dogs, Mr. Winter!" she called to him as she sped by very graceful and handsome through the snow.

Winter scowled and made no answer.

His mind was in a torment of dread as to what awaited him.

All day long his thoughts had been with Minnie, and the pendulum of hope and desire had swung mercilessly to and fro in his heart.

Yes or No! Which would it be?

The mere thought of losing her almost stopped his heart, even while the knowledge of what any-

thing else would mean filled him with dread lest he should fail her, or fall short of her beautiful belief in him.

The lights of the village shone like welcoming eyes through the gathering darkness as they crossed the slippery field paths which led away past the mountain railway, the frozen snow scrunching beneath their feet.

"It's such a long, horrid way," the Manchester Minx wailed wearily. "I wish I hadn't come."

Winter shifted the two pairs of skis which he had been carrying to a more comfortable position on his shoulder.

"We're nearly there now," he said.

He spoke patiently, but he was in a fever of impatience. His eyes were strained towards the hotel and the window which he knew was Minnie's. No light there to-night. They were late, so perhaps she had already dressed for dinner and was waiting downstairs.

Talking to old Stamford perhaps, or to Lionel Sylvester, confound him!

Unconsciously he hastened his steps.

"You're walking very fast, Mr. Winter," wailed the Minx; and reluctantly he slackened speed again.

Yes or No! Yes or No!

He was torn with the desire to know what his fate was to be.

He felt that anything would be preferable to

this suspense of uncertainty. He drew a deep breath of relief when at last they reached the hotel. He looked at the girl stumbling wearily beside him.

"You go straight in. I'll put the skis away."

To his relief she left him at once, calling out to Laura and Mrs. Yates, who were well in front, to wait for her, and William flung the skis down in the big sports' shed and turned impatiently to the back staircase which led up direct into the hotel lounge.

Yes or No! His heart was pounding like a sledge-hammer.

There seemed to be an unusual silence everywhere; the lounge was almost deserted, but as he stood stamping the caked snow from his heavy boots old Stamford came down the stairs.

William called to him cheerily.

"Hullo! what's the matter with the place tonight? Where is everyone?"

Then he saw the old man's face, and he repeated his question more sharply.

"What's the matter? Is anything the matter?"

Old Stamford's voice was all hoarse and broken when he spoke.

"Haven't you heard? No, no, of course you haven't. . . . You've only just come in, I can see that."

He choked back an ugly sound like a sob.

"There's been an accident . . . that damnable bob run. . . . I always said it was too dangerous. Perhaps something will be done now."

He looked, for once, what he was—a very old man.

William gave a sharp exclamation of dismay.

"An accident! Nothing serious, I hope?"

But he knew that it was before old Stamford told him in a voice choked and laboured with distress.

"The worst! . . . She must have fallen on her head. . . . She was killed outright! . . . Oh, my God! my God!" . . .

He broke into the pitiful whimpering of an old man who has seen a young life destroyed.

"I was looking on. She begged me so hard to go and look on. I saw it all, and I could do nothing . . . nothing."

"Who was it? Not anyone from this hotel?"

No answer, and William jerked the question out again. "Not anyone . . . from this . . ."

Still no answer, only that dreadful whimpering, till William caught the old man's arm with fingers of steel.

"Not . . . anyone . . . Who?—who——? . . . in God's name!"

But he knew—he knew—already.

"Mrs. Laleham."

William had not moved. There was a curiously blind look in his eyes, and his lips were as

white as the snow which was slowly melting on his shoulders.

Old Stamford had fallen weeping into a chair.

"I blame myself. . . . I urged her to go! God knows I blame myself. She was so anxious to try. . . . She felt so out of all the fun . . . and they promised to take care of her. . . . It was my fault! . . . my fault!"

William turned like a statue which has come suddenly to life. He swept aside the concièrge and Dr. Adelbert, who each tried pityingly to bar his way; he thrust the sobbing Laura brutally from him when she caught at his arm; he went up the wide staircase like a madman, one word on his lips which sounded like blasphemy.

"God! . . . God! . . . God!"

The agonised throbbing of his heart seemed to tear it from his breast.

Outside her closed door—ah! he knew now why there had been no light in her room—Christine sat huddled in a chair sobbing, her apron over her head.

"Ach, die Liebchen! die Liebchen!"

She looked up when she heard William's step and, rising, broke into voluble explanations, wringing her hands hysterically; but he passed her without a glance and opened that closed door, shutting it fast behind him.

And so for the first time in all the years he had loved her William stood in Minnie's room.

The superstitious Christine had placed candles there to keep away evil spirits, and they burned steadily on either side of the dressing-table, which was still strewn with Minnie's things.

William looked at them and then into the blackness of the room beyond, where all that was left of the one woman whom he had really and sincerely loved lay asleep.

And a thousand memories of her came crowding back across the years, stabbing him with steel points of pain.

Her flushed, distressed face when, as a child, she had tried to say "Little Boy Blue" to him in French, and he had poured out his scorn upon her; her agony of embarrassment when she had been forced to recite Stevenson's poem; the wide look of pain in her eyes when she had walked into Rosa Flint's drawing-room and found him there; her tears when she had scalded her hand making tea for him, and her one passionate outburst last night when she had admitted her love for him.

Not one really happy memory, not one! And it was all his fault. He had hurt her so often; almost his earliest memory of her was with the tears in her eyes as his last had been.

He had come for his answer, and it was waiting for him, as she had promised.

"God! oh, God! if there is a God, let me die too!"

But as he stumbled blindly forward to where she lay his eyes were drawn again by the flickering candles on either side of the mirror, and he stopped for a moment, gazing towards them.

"Our phantom voices haunt the air
As we were still at play.
And I can hear them call and say,
'How far is it to Babylon?'
Ah, far enough, my dear,
Far, far enough from here.
Yet you have farther gone!

'Can I get there by candlelight?'
So goes the old refrain.
I do not know—perchance you might—
But only children hear it right.
Ah! never to return again!
The eternal dawn, without a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And put all stars and candles out
Ere we be young again."

As he stood there the visionary face of a child with long, ungraceful plaits, dangling over either shoulder slowly took misty form and shape in the mirror, and while he waited transfixed, his heart breaking with despair, she smiled at him with wistful eyes and shy, tremulous lips.

"Oh, my dear! my dear!"

Someone came running at the sound of that desperate cry, and in the sudden draught from the opening door the candlelight wavered, flickered uncertainly, and went out.

THE END

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